

THE ARAB TURMOIL AND THE CONFLICT IN THE UKRAINE

Ehud Eilam

(Holds a M.A. & a Ph.D in his field: Israel's national strategy and military doctrine. He has been involved with the study of those subjects, academically and practically for more than 20 years. Dr. Eilam also worked for a few years as a researcher in his expertise for Israel's Ministry of Defense, as a private contractor. He is now resides near Boston, USA)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)

Publication date: 9 December 2014

Note: For questions, comments about the article etc. please write to Ehud at Ehudei2014@gmail.com

Note: Ehud Eilam Books:

His new book about the next war between Israel and Egypt:

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Next-between-Israel-Egypt/dp/0853038384>

His next book: Israel's strategic challenges in the Middle East.

<http://www.palgrave.com/page/detail/israel%E2%80%99s-strategic-challenges-in-the-middle-east-/?K=9781137484321>

There is a certain similarity between the Arab turmoil in the Middle East and the conflict in the Ukraine. This has to do with the resemblance and linkage between Russia and Iran, Turkey and Poland and the nature of the battlefield.

Russia and Iran

Following the seizing of the Crimea peninsula by Russia the latter was cast out of the G - 8 and absorbed sanctions. Russia might learn, in the words of Bob Hope that "the Crimea does not pay". He referred to Nazi Germany that fought and eventually lost the Crimea in the Second World War. In the current crisis in the Ukraine some had compared Russia to the Third Reich.(1) Iran was also compared to Nazi Germany due to her aggressive foreign policy. (2)

Russia's moves in the Ukraine are part of Russia's desire to reestablish her control or at least her influence in Eastern European countries that are former Soviet satellite states. Iran wants too to restore past glory, in her case by gaining a foothold in Middle Eastern countries that were part of the ancient Persian kingdom and / or the Muslim empire.

The strategic strength of Russia and Iran is based on their vast territory, large population and their main source of income, the enormous amounts of oil and natural gas they possess. Russia exploits her might to intervene in the Ukraine, which is quite fragile. Iran does the same in weak states in the Middle East such as Lebanon and Iraq. Russia supports armed groups in the Ukraine, including by sending Russian troops to fight there. Iran assists armed groups across the Middle East, including by sending there, like to Yemen, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). (3)

For Russia and Iran as well their fight is a kind of a crusade, a strategic, political and ideological one. However in the Ukraine the conflict is not about religion while for Iran her struggle has also to do with the rift inside the Muslim world, between Sunnis and Shiites such as Iran.

After Russia violated the agreement it signed regarding the fight in the Ukraine 'the European Union adopted only token measures in response to the violations, adding several more Russian individuals to a blacklist. (4) President Obama said in mid-November 2014 that western states would go on isolating Russia although for now there would be no more sanctions.(5) The Obama administration and the European Union also avoided imposing heavier sanctions on Iran. With Russia the disagreement is over the Ukraine while with Iran the dispute is about her nuclear program. From western perspective in both cases Russia and Iran crossed the line, each one in its own way.

Western powers are not willing to consider a military option against Russia, since while Iran strives to gain nuclear weapons Russia has a giant nuclear arsenal. Yet western states don't want to confront Iran too. Iran could retaliate to a western attack in several ways. First of all, Iran could try to block the vital Strait of Hormuz and by that to disrupt the flow of oil from the Gulf.

Second, Iran could launch missiles at oil infrastructure of Arab Gulf states, after blaming them for assisting western states in attacking Iran, whether it is true or not. Third, Iran could order her proxies and ' sleeper cells ' to strike, maybe not only in the Middle East but in Europe and the United States as well. Fourth, Iran could conduct cyber warfare.

Iran and Russia are controlled by dominant leaders, Vladimir Putin in Russia and Ali Khamenei in Iran who expressed their opinions about western states, sometimes in quite a blunt way. Khamenei and Putin support the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria against western states that are considered as rivals although the latter could be also partners of Russia and Iran against common enemies like ISIS. Iran and Russia also have conflict of interests such as on obtaining sphere of influence in central Asia and the Caucasus.

Russia, Iran and Israel

Russia helps Iran's nuclear project. (6) In the same time Russia has relations with Israel, which has been very concerned about Iran's nuclear program. Since the governments of Iran and Israel have no contact with each other, at least not an official one, Russia could serve as a mediator between them. This would be essential particularly if there is a major crisis let alone a clash between Israel and Iran. The latter and Israel might trust Russia, if only for lack of a better option, to assist in preventing a war or to reach a cease fire if a confrontation had already started. Russia might agree to do that since this role would upgrade her status in the Middle East, on the expense of the United States.

Israel kept a neutral position about the conflict in the Ukraine, an approach which annoyed her American patron. (7) On the other hand Israel might have lost up to a billion dollar in trade and other transactions with Russia, all concerning military issues, since Israel took into consideration American interests. (8) Israel therefore tries to maneuver between the United States, the Ukraine and Russia. This might create an opportunity in which Israel becomes a broker between the two sides. Yet the probability of that is quite low because the different parties probably would assume Israel does not have the status and experience for playing such a role and they might not have confidence in her in this complicated affair.

Following the crisis in the Ukraine in April 2014, according to Michael Doran, senior fellow in the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, 'Putin's muscular foreign policy and Washington's timorous response have increased the pressure on Israel to strike independently (9) i.e. to attack Iran's nuclear sites. Not only Israel but Arab states as well such as Saudi Arabia waited to see if and what the United States does in the Ukraine, which might have proven to Iran that the United States is still a superpower that calls the shots. This could have urged Iran to be more compliant to American demands.

Yet if the United States was too occupied with the Ukraine it could have been on the expense of handling Iran and this could have continued for months and even years. Furthermore the United States wishes to focus more on East Asia, which could be on the expense of the Middle East. Resetting the American priorities could reduce the importance of the Middle East, including of Iran, to come after East Asia and East Europe i.e. the Ukraine. '24 out of 28 NATO members spend less than the alliance's defense guideline of 2% of GDP. (10) This is one reason why the United States might not get much help from other NATO members against Russia while Israel is willing to join forces with the United States against Iran. However, the United States opposes a joint strike or just an Israeli raid on Iran's nuclear sites. The Obama administration prefers to continue the exchange of information with Israel about Iran's nuclear program but not as part of planning an attack. From American point of view this cooperation with Israel supposes to serve the United States in her negotiations with Iran in order to prevent a war by reaching a reasonable agreement. So far this strategy brought limited results.

Egypt might get closer to Russia, instead of relying on the United States although both the latter and Egypt don't want Iran to hold nuclear weapons and they see her as a potential threat. Egypt should be concerned about Russia's aid to Iran in the nuclear matter. Meanwhile Egypt is planning an arms deal with Russia such as to buy fighters like MIG 29 (11) and maybe also S-300, sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles. (12) Egypt's military buildup is one of the factors that could cause tension between Israel and Egypt, which might deteriorate their relations and in the worst case lead to a confrontation. Iran would be pleased to see both her foes, Israel and Egypt, bash each other. (13)

Poland and Turkey

Poland has been training for a possible war against Russia. (14) Poland has bitter memory from the Soviet era. Ukraine has a border with states that are NATO members like Poland. In Syria battles take place near another member of NATO, Turkey. Poland and Turkey might require help from the alliance but NATO might hesitate because of the risks of intervening in the war in Syria and the fear of a severe friction with Russia due to military and economic reasons. The fact that Turkey is a Muslim country, in contrast to other NATO members, might also have an impact in this subject.

On early February 2014 Poland asked for meeting of NATO members according to article 4 of the Washington Treaty, which called for consultations 'whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence, or security of any of the parties is threatened.' The meeting concluded that for NATO Russia's steps in the Ukraine 'present serious implications for the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area.' (15) When Jens Stoltenberg became NATO Secretary General on 1 October 2014, 'he made it clear that Russia's intervention in Ukraine challenged Euro-Atlantic security. (16) Although NATO members such as Poland don't face a clear and present danger the alliance should be ready to deter any hostile acts against her.

Following the Syrian civil war NATO deployed in early 2013 Patriot anti-aircraft missile batteries in Turkey, after the latter requested that. This followed a failed attempt 'to persuade NATO to stage a more muscular intervention in Syria, such as a no-fly zone. (17) This was not needed at least not for Turkey, which has a much more powerful military than Syria, and was not at substantial risk so NATO could have stayed out of the Syrian quagmire.

Turkey and Russia have major disputes since Russia supports Assad while Turkey wants to topple him. Turkey also opposes the annexation of the Crimea and it is bothered by the policy toward the Tatar Turkic minority in that peninsula. On the other hand Turkey and Russia have strong economic ties such as in tourism, trade and energy. (18) Furthermore Turkey has a unique position as a state that has a border with Syria and it is also near the Ukraine and Russia since all

of them have shores on the Black Sea. This factor emphasizes the value of Turkey as a bridge between Syria, Ukraine and Russia, which could help in finding a compromise about the problems in both Syria and the Ukraine.

The nature of the battlefield

About 1,000 people were killed in the Ukraine since a ceasefire was declared in September 2014. Since April 2014 more than 4,300 fighters and non-combatants were killed there. (19) In Syria more than 190,000 civilians, troops and fighters died since 2011. (20) The casualties in Syria are obviously much bigger than those in the Ukraine but the war in the Ukraine might have just started so the human cost there might increase. In both regions there is a danger of escalation that would drag into the conflict other states. The deterioration in the Ukraine might be much more severe; if NATO gets entangled there since both NATO and Russia have nuclear weapons. In Syria Assad gave up most of his chemical weapons, and anyway this arsenal is far less lethal than a nuclear bomb.

Libya of Muammar al – Gaddafi gave up her nuclear option before the civil war began there in 2011. (21) This allowed western states to attack Libya such as by launching air bombardments, which contributed to bringing down Gaddafi. Russia, which strongly opposed the western offensive in Libya, enjoys in the Ukraine the same advantage. Russia probably would have avoided her adventure in Ukraine if the latter had kept her nuclear weapons. Ukraine has a certain right to demand that western states, which had a major interest in disarming Ukraine from her nuclear weapons in the 1990s, would assist in protecting her now from Russia.

Meanwhile the fight in the Ukraine and in the Middle East such as in Syria is a conventional one, a kind of a hybrid war. Although there are air attacks and armor movements there are no major clashes between planes, tanks etc. but more use of artillery and infantry warfare in open and urban areas.

Soviet arsenal such as armored vehicles, anti-tank missiles and light arms is used by all sides in the Ukraine and in Syria as well. This is since the Ukrainian forces, from both sides, and of

course the Russian aid to their allies is based on soviet gear and weapons. If western states send massive amount of weapons to the Ukrainian government this picture might change. In Syria Assad's forces and their rivals rely on Soviet arsenal too. This could cause "friendly fire" particularly in cases when both sides do not have their own color, identifying marks etc. on their vehicles and anyway have difficulties recognizing them, like at night, so it is not clear to which side an approaching vehicle like a BMP belongs to. On the other hand since the enemy has similar weapons, ammunition etc. it is easy to use them immediately if they are captured and each side is well aware to the capability of his foe's arsenal. In Iraq the parties hold Soviet but also American equipment and weapons that were provided to Iraqi forces and part of it fell into the hands of ISIS.

All in all there is a resemblance between the conflict in the Ukraine and the turmoil in the Middle East like how Russia in the Ukraine and Iran in the Middle East try to change the status quo by force. The challenge of western states is how to prevent that from happening without paying a heavy price let alone getting dragged into a war. This could be done by deterring and containing the rival and by helping a local ally.

The battlefield in the Ukraine is much closer to most NATO members than the clashes in Syria, particularly if the campaign spreads to west Ukraine, near the border with states like Poland. Such a development would urge NATO to increase her involvement in her new eastern front.

Endnotes:

- (1) On comparing Russia to the Third Reich see:
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-suspends-military-activities-with-russia/article17289679/>
<http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304432604579473601000109452>
- (2) <http://www.ibtimes.com/iran-modern-day-nazi-germany-705447>
<http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Iran-Nazi-Germany-must-be-compared>
- (3) On IRGC see: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.617924>
<http://www.worldtribune.com/2014/10/17/yemen-cites-intelligence-iran-directed-shiite-takeover-capital/>
- (4) http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/prove-to-mr-putin-that-he-is-not-invincible/2014/11/25/8198bd50-74d2-11e4-bd1b-03009bd3e984_story.html

- (5) <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/17/world/asia/obama-close-to-calling-russian-action-in-ukraine-an-invasion.html>
- (6) <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/24/us-iran-nuclear-russia-idUSKBN0EZ1JG20140624>
- (7) On the Israeli approach about the crisis in the Ukraine see:
www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000944120
<http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/578/276.html>
- (8) On the Israeli lost see: <http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000944120>
- (9) <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2014/04/04-vladimir-putin-ukraine-reveals-his-view-of-middle-east-iran>
- (10) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/12/shocked-by-ukraine-violence-nato-prepares-to-face-down-putin.html>
- (11) On arms deal with Russia see: http://defense-update.com/20140422_egypt-interested-buying-24-mig-35s-russia.html#.VFJUhfzSxU
- (12) On arms deal between Russia and Egypt see:
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/africa/13899-russian-sale-of-s-300-system-to-egypt-a-threat-to-israel>
- (13) See my new book: The Next War between Israel and Egypt - Examining a High Intensity War between Two of the Strongest Militaries in the Middle East (Edgware, U.K: Vallentine Mitchell 2014). <http://www.amazon.com/The-Next-between-Israel-Egypt/dp/0853038384>
- (14) <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/poland-nato-the-return-history-9336>
- (15) http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_107716.htm
- (16) <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/10/12/shocked-by-ukraine-violence-nato-prepares-to-face-down-putin.html>
- (17) <http://world.time.com/2013/02/01/patriot-missiles-arrive-in-turkey-how-they-affect-the-syria-equation/>
- (18) <http://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-erdogan-turn-blind-eye-to-countries-differences/>
- (19) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/20/ukraine-ceasefire-death-toll-united-nations-human-rights>
- (20) <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/08/22/united-nations-syria-death-toll/14429549/>
- (21) <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/LibyaChronology>