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Russia bridges Middle Eastern divides

By M K Bhadrakumar
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A multi-billion dollar arms deal with Iraq, a summit meeting with Turkey, a fence-mending exercise with Saudi Arabia, a debut with Egypt's Sphinx-like Muslim Brothers - all this is slated to happen within the period of a turbulent month in the Middle East. And all this is to happen when the United States' "return" to the region after the hurly-burly of the November election still seems a distant dream. Simply put, Russia is suddenly all over the Middle East.

Moscow announced on Tuesday that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was in town and the two countries signed contracts worth "more than" US\$4.2 billion in an arms deal that includes Iraq's purchase of 30 Mi-28 attack helicopters and 42 Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile systems that can also be used to defend against attack jets.

The joint Russian-Iraqi statement issued in Moscow revealed that discussions had been going on for the past five months over the arms deal and that further talks are under way for Iraq's purchase of MiG-29 jets, heavy-armored vehicles and other weaponry. A Kremlin announcement said Maliki is due to meet President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday and the focus of the discussions will be energy cooperation between Russia and Iraq.

The stunning news will send US politicians into a tizzy. Reports say the phone kept ringing in Maliki's office in Baghdad as soon as it transpired that he was to travel to Moscow and something big could be in the works. Queries were coming in from the US State Department and the National Security Council as to what warranted such a trip at this point in time.

The point is, Maliki still remains an enigma for Washington. He is no doubt a friend of the US,

but he is also possibly more than a friend of Iran. Now, it seems, he is also fond of Russia - as Saddam Hussein used to be.

Washington and Ankara have annoyed him repeatedly, taking him for granted, even writing off his political future, by consorting with the northern Kurdistan over lucrative oil deals, ignoring his protests that Iraq is a sovereign state and Baghdad is its capital and that the country has a constitution under which foreign countries should not have direct dealings with its regions bypassing the capital and the central government.

Booting out Big Oil

They not only ignored Maliki's protests but also chastised him for opposing the plan for "regime change" in Syria and for robustly supporting President Bashar al-Assad. Lately, they even started needling him on providing facilities for Iran to send supplies to the embattled regime in Syria. They then exceeded all proprieties and gave asylum to an Iraqi Sunni leader who is a fugitive under Iraqi law.

They are currently endeavoring to bring together the disparate Sunni groups in Iraq in an ominous move that could lead to the balkanization of Iraq.

Kurdistan is already a de facto independent region, thanks to US and Turkish interference. The game plan is to further weaken Iraq by sponsoring the creation of a Sunni entity in central Iraq similar to Kurdistan in the north, thus confining the Iraqi Shi'ites to a moth-eaten southern region.

The Russia visit shows that Maliki is signaling he has had enough and won't take this affront to Iraqi sovereignty anymore. What is almost certain is that he will propose to Putin on Wednesday that Russian oil companies should return to Iraq in full battle cry with investment and technology and pick up the threads from where they left at the time of the US invasion in 2003.

Maliki can be expected to boot out Big Oil and the Turkish companies from Iraq's oil sector. The implications are profound for the world oil market since Iraq's fabulous oil reserves match Saudi Arabia's.

Clearly, Maliki intends to assert Iraqi sovereignty. Recently, he decided to terminate the Saddam-era agreement with Turkey, which allowed a Turkish military presence in northern Iraq to monitor the PKK separatists' activities. But Ankara balked, telling off Maliki. The Russian deal enables him now to rebuild the Iraqi armed forces and make the Turks think twice before they violate Iraqi air space or conclude that their military presence in northern Iraq could continue unchallenged.

Does this mean Iraq is on a course of strategic defiance of the US? What needs to be factored in is that the US still remains Iraq's number one arms supplier. Iraq is expecting the delivery of 30 F-16 aircraft. A strategic defiance of the US is far from Maliki's thoughts - at least, for now.

Maliki's message needs to be taken more as one of assertively stating that Iraq is an independent

country. Arguably, it is not very different from the thrust of Egypt's policies under President Mohammed Morsi. Simply put, the US needs to come to terms with such happenings as Maliki's decision to revive the military ties with Russia or Morsi's decision to pay his first state visit to China. Conceivably, it could be Egypt's turn next to revive the ties with Russia. As a matter of fact, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov is scheduled to visit Cairo in early November in the first high-level exchange with Morsi's leadership.

Indeed, much depends on the composure with which the US is able to adapt itself to the new realities in the Middle East. As things stand, the US has succeeded in selling \$6 billion worth of arms to Iraq. It is indeed comfortably placed. The US State Department's initial reaction exuded confidence. Spokesperson Victoria Nuland said the Russian deal doesn't signify any scaling down of Iraq's "mil-to-mil" ties with the US, which are "very broad and very deep".

She revealed that discussions are going on for "some 467 foreign military sales cases" with Iraq worth more than \$12 billion "if all of those go forward." Nuland said, "We're doing some \$12.3 billion worth of military business with Iraq, so I don't think one needs to be concerned about that relationship being anything but the strongest."

New, untried alchemy

But the touch of anxiety in Nuland's words cannot be glossed over, either. The plain truth is, the "Russians are coming" and this time they are capitalists and globalists; they also know the Iraqi market, while the Iraqi soldier is familiar with the Russian weapon. During the Saddam era, Iraq was a major buyer of Russian weaponry and Moscow is estimated to have lost contracts worth about \$8 billion due to the US-sponsored "regime change" in Baghdad in 2003.

Conceivably, Russia will do its utmost to claw its way back to the top spot in the Iraqi market and to make up for lost time. But then, arms deals invariably have political and strategic content as well. In the near term, the "unknown unknown" is going to be whether Maliki might choose to share the Iraqi capabilities with his close Iranian and Syrian allies.

Significantly, high-level Syrian and Iranian delegations have also visited Moscow in recent months. Eyebrows will be raised that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad is scheduling a visit to Baghdad shortly. In fact, even as the Russian-Iraqi arms deal was signed in Moscow, the commander of the navy of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards arrived on a visit to Iraq, signifying the close ties between Baghdad and Tehran. No doubt, Washington will remain on its toes on this front.

Equally, Russian experts have written in the past about the emergence of a new "bloc" in the heart of the Middle East comprising Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon with which Moscow can hope to have special ties.

However, the incipient signs as of now are that Moscow's regional diplomacy in the Middle East is shifting gear, determined to bridge the regional divide that the Syrian crisis has brought about. Of course, the enterprise seems awesome in its sheer audacity. But then, Putin is scheduled to travel to Turkey next week; Lavrov hopes to travel to Riyadh in early November to attend the

second session of Russia's Strategic Dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council states (which was once abruptly postponed by the Saudi regime as a snub to Moscow for its dogged support for the Assad regime in Syria); Lavrov will also make a "synchronized visit" to Cairo for meeting with the new Egyptian leadership and Arab League officials.

Disclosing Lavrov's scheduled diplomatic missions, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov added, "We [Russia] are interested in the dialogue and open partnership discussion with our Arab colleagues from the Gulf, which, in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar and others, play a rather active and not one-meaning role in Syrian affairs. We always favor discussion of these issues, even disagreements, at the negotiating table, especially since we have the Strategic Dialogue mechanism."

Without doubt, Russian alchemists are experimenting with new, untried formulations that may help heal the Syrian wounds. But, as Bogdanov sought to explain, these formulations are also broad spectrum medications that will help induce the overall metabolism of Russia's regional ties with recalcitrant partners who are upset for the present over Syria. Ideally, Moscow would like to see that healing process is embedded within an overall enhancement of mutually beneficial economic ties.

Russia's ties with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, for instance, were going strong during the phase of the pre-crisis period in Syria. While the ties with Turkey lately have somewhat stagnated, Russian-Saudi ties have run into serious difficulty. Evidently, Moscow is keen to restore the status quo ante. The interesting part is the Russian diplomacy's assessment that the present juncture provides a window of opportunity to make overtures to Ankara and Riyadh, no matter the incessant blood-letting in Syria.

The backdrop to which this is happening is significant. In Moscow's assessment, evidently, there could be hopeful signs for a renewed approach to seeking a political solution to the Syrian crisis even though the skies look heavily overcast. There may be merit in making such a shrewd assessment.

As things stand, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are facing an acute predicament over the Syrian situation. Neither thought that the Syrian regime would have such a social base and political will to hang on; both are frustrated that any "regime change" in Syria is going to be a long haul fraught with uncertain consequences not only for the Syrian nation but also for the region as a whole and even for themselves.

Again, while there is no let-up in the dogged opposition to outside intervention in Syria, which Moscow and Beijing have amply displayed, a UN Security Council mandate for intervention is to be ruled out. Without a UN mandate, on the other hand, a Western intervention is unlikely, and in any case, the US remains disinterested while the European attitudes will be guided by their priorities over their economies, which, according to the latest International Monetary Fund estimation, are sliding into a prolonged recession from which a near-term recovery seems highly improbable.

Sultan with a Nobel

In short, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are holding a can of worms containing the Syrian rebel elements that are not only disparate but also could prove troublesome in future. As for Turkey, with or without a UN mandate, the popular opinion is overwhelmingly against an intervention in Syria.

The Turkish people remain far from convinced that their vital national interests are at stake in Syria. Besides, the Turkish economy is also slowing, and a deep recession in Europe can play havoc with Turkey's economic fortunes. The ruling AKP's trump card so far has been that it steered Turkey to a period of unprecedented economic prosperity.

Increasingly, therefore, all this proactivism on Syria looks more like the hare-brained idea of the academic-turned Foreign Minister Ahmet Davitoglu and Prime Minister Recep Erdogan than a well-thought out foreign policy initiative. But even here, Erdogan's political priorities are going to change as he prepares for his bid to become the executive president of Turkey under a new constitution in 2014.

A Syrian quagmire can threaten his political ambitions, and already he senses rivalry from the incumbent President Abdullah Gul, whose popular ratings are manifestly far better than his own.

In sum, Erdogan wants regime change in Syria and he is still pushing for it, but he wants it now. He can't wait indefinitely, since that will upset his own political calendar. He is upset, on the other hand, that US President Barack Obama is not a man in a hurry and the Europeans are distracted by ailments.

All factors taken into consideration, therefore, it should come as no surprise that Putin has made a visit to Turkey such an urgent priority - although Erdogan visited Russia hardly two months ago. Putin has excellent personal equations with Erdogan. They were instrumental in taking Russian-Turkish relationship to such qualitatively new level in recent years.

Putin is a very focused statesman. He wants to revive the verve of the Russian-Turkish tango. In the process, the contract for building a \$25 billion nuclear power plant in Turkey could be advanced to the implementation stage, and Russia may also secure contracts to sell weaponry to Turkey.

In the Russian assessment, Erdogan's underlying ideology in terms of pursuing an independent foreign policy needs to be encouraged, despite the recent deviations such as the decision to deploy the US missile defence system on Turkish soil.

Putin's expectation will be that within the framework of a revival of the Russian-Turkish bonhomie and taking advantage of Erdogan's travails and dilemma over Syria, a meaningful conversation between Moscow and Ankara might be possible leading to a purposive search for a political solution to the crisis in Syria.

This is the season of Nobel, after all. If Erdogan could be persuaded that he could be the first

ever sultan - and probably the last, too, in Ottoman history - to win a Nobel prize for peace, Putin would have made a huge contribution himself to world peace.