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The Russian Bear steps in as the American Empire Unravels in the Middle East

By Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya

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US power in the Middle East is in decline, and American allies in the region are beginning to think of new alternatives to Washington.

The Cold War never ended for America's leaders. There should be no illusions about it, the United States has strategically worked to contain and weaken both the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. The American strategy in the Middle East and Washington's hostilities against both the Iranians and the Syrians has been part and parcel of the American line of attack against Moscow and Beijing.

In spite of Washington's efforts, the lines that it had a part in carving in the sands of the volatile Middle East after 1945, tortured by consistent foreign meddling and the bitter rivalries of regional dynasties and powers, are shifting yet again. The winds are erasing the old lines, while regional and global events are drawing new ones to take their places.

Pax Americana, the so-called American Peace, is dead. It was never much of a peace anyway. In context of the Middle East, the term itself signifies a period of US dominance that arose after the Second World War and reached its zenith in 1978. Then in 1979 came along the Iranian

Revolution. A few decades later, the monumental blunders of the US government of George W. Bush Jr. cast the dye for the steady decline of American influence.

Steady Decline of the US in Middle East

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was so sure in 2006 that American domination in the broader Middle East would expand. She triumphantly declared amidst Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon that the map of the Middle East would forever change to the profit of the United States. It did not, and Israel lost the war too. US influence began eroding, while the influence of its rivals began increasing.



A man holds up a broken wooden structure in a burnt makeshift Syrian refugee camp after it was attacked by residents of the neighbouring eastern Lebanese village of Qsar Naba near Zahle in the Bekaa valley, on December 2, 2013.

Hamas would become democratically elected by the Palestinian people to represent them. Not only would Hamas gain control over the Gaza Strip, but it would retain its control over the territory after the US would conspire with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, the Palestinian warlord Mohammed Dahlan, and the impotent Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, to topple the Hamas government in Gaza.

The economic blockade, political sabotage, a mini-civil war with Fatah, nor the series of wars launched by Israel have removed the Hamas-led government in Gaza.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah's influence would increase dramatically. The March 14 Alliance, the Hariri-led Lebanese entity sponsored by the US and its allies against Hezbollah, has proven to be

impotent in its task of neutralizing Hezbollah and its political allies in Lebanon's March 8 Alliance. Although politically-motivated reports keep touting that Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has weakened it and hurt its popularity in Lebanon, in reality the situation is the opposite for the Lebanese group. An Israeli intelligence report authored by the Mossad has been forced to admit that Hezbollah has actually entered a golden age.

All things considered, America's plans to redraw the Middle East's borders, intended to create smaller states that could easily be controlled by Washington as a means of maintaining its imperial order, is still nowhere to be found. Washington's 'New Middle East' has not materialized. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the project's flames are still burning in Iraq and Syria and it has made some sectarian inroads, which include the division of Sudan and the destabilization of North Africa.

Unraveling Empire

The US has not neutralized its two main adversaries in the Middle East. The objective of regime change in Damascus has failed and Washington did not unleash the might of the Pentagon on Syria. An interim nuclear deal was reached in the Swiss city of Geneva between America and Iran.

The decisions by the United States not to go to war with Syria or to finally strike a deal with the Iranians are not the reasons for the unraveling of American power. American power was already on the decline. Washington struck deals involving Syria and Iran as a means of trying to maintain its influence in the broader Middle East and to actually slow the speed of its decline.

Instead, America's allies and clients are fuming and feeling scared. As a result of the declining power of the United States, Washington's allies and clients are slowly diversifying their relationships. From Tel Aviv and Riyadh, the regional allies of the US realize that America's imperial umbrella over them has begun to erode. They are looking for alternatives to the US patronage.

Russian Bear returns to Nile Delta?

The United States declared that it was partially cutting its military aid to Egypt on October 9, 2013. The move was described as part of a new US '*recalibration*' in the Middle East. It was criticized by the Egyptian military as a hindering step that would weaken the Egyptian military while it was fighting rogue elements, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula.

American aid to the Egyptian military has ebbed. The task has covertly been outsourced to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Arab petro-sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf. All things considered, Washington can no longer afford to fund the Egyptian military. Cairo senses that America is in a state of decline too and has begun looking for alternatives to the US sponsorship.

About one month after the US government partially suspended its military aid to Egypt, on November 11, 2013, a Russian missile cruise ship, the Varyag, made a port call to the Mediterranean docks of the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria. Days later, this port call was

followed by a Russian Navy auxiliary vessel docking at the Egyptian port of Safaga. The second Russian ship was the Boris Butoma, a naval supply or replenishment ship. Russia has not made a port call to Egypt since 1992 and it has not had a significant military presence in Egypt since the Soviet era during the Cold War.

The Russian port calls were matched on the diplomatic levels by the Kremlin on November 13, 2013. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu arrived with large delegations to Egypt in what Lavrov described as a “*historic*” event. The two cabinet ministers were sent to Cairo by the Kremlin as feelers to get a sense of the mood in Egypt.

There are questions being asked about the Egyptian side’s intentions. Are Egyptian officials reaching out to Russia as a bargaining chip against the US or are they reaching out as a genuine alternative to the US? In other words, is Cairo turning to Moscow as a means of bargaining with Washington or as a response to US control and pressure?



A rebel fighter from the Free Syrian Army holds a position with a Belgium made FAL rifle at a front line in the Salah al-Din neighbourhood of the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, on December 1, 2013.

After the Russian visit to Egypt, US Secretary of State John Kerry returned to Egypt to protect US influence. It looks like Cairo wants flexibility and leverage against the US as a means of loosening Washington’s grip so that the Egyptian regime is not dragged down with the American sinking imperial order. The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood and dissolution of the regional alliance against Syria has sent a negative message to all of America’s allies and clients. Everyone in the region, corrupt and just alike, is more aware than ever that the US will not protect them. Instead they have noticed that those that are aligned with Iran and Russia are the ones that remain standing.

Russian Resurgence in Middle East

The Russian Federation was already the second largest provider of arms to Egypt before the US government decided to partially cut back US military aid to Cairo. Russia is merely taking advantage of the retreat of the US to build and expand on the already existing Egyptian-Russian trade relationship. Nor is Egypt the only place that Russian arms manufactures are edging into. Iraq signed an arms deal with Moscow in 2012, which made Russia the second largest provider of military hardware to Iraq after the United States.

Russia's friendly relations with Iran and the entire Resistance Bloc have given it a level of leverage with Israel. The large population of Russian emigrants and Russian-speakers in Israel has added to Russia's leverage. The presence of a large Russian-speaking community in Israel is one of the reasons that Israeli politicians visit Russia and go on Russian channels during election seasons. Furthermore, Moscow has been a member of the inept Middle East Quartet, which is supposed to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians since it was created in 2002.

New inroads have been made across the Middle East since 2011 for Russia and Russian influence in the Levant has steadily become entrenched. The Russian Federation has reinvigorated its ties to Lebanon and initiated a strategic dialogue with Lebanon's Hezbollah.

The Syrians are critically thankful to Moscow for its support. Along with Iran, Russia has been a major influence in Damascus and helped Syria withstand regime change. The terrorist attack on the Russian Embassy in Damascus is a testimony to Russia's important influence.

To call the magnification of the Russian profile in the Middle East a re-entrance of some sort is inaccurate. The Middle East has always been on the doorsteps of the Russian Federation. What is taking place is a new surge in Russian influence as the US recedes.