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**THE MIDDLE EAST:
THE MAIN TRENDS**

About the authors:

Andrey Skriba

Research fellow, Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

Dmitry Novikov

Research fellow, Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

In late February, in Moscow, the Valdai Discussion Club hosted the 5th meeting of the Valdai Middle East dialogue, «The Middle East: From Violence to Security.» The following is a summary of the discussions and conclusions reached by its participants.

Key points:

1. *The primary challenge revolves around the internal processes, which lead to the erosion of the state.*
2. *An external intervention can overcome this challenge, but it must be consistent with a specific model that has yet to be developed (based on the Syrian experience).*
3. *Components that are necessary for a likely Middle East evolutionary transformation – a road map, independent (not external) governance with preferable foreign support, and the centralisation of the process.*
4. *The concept of Great Eurasia free from political agenda and pressure on partner countries, which attracts new participants to the region, who can iron out the imbalances introduced by Western policies is one way of making such a transformation possible.*
5. *External intervention is important and necessary to resolve state-to-state problems in the region or at least, to stop them.*
6. *International terrorism in the Middle East aggravates internal and regional problems and exports the threats outside the region. All stakeholders must be committed to fighting terrorism.*
7. *Terrorism is a product of the weakness and ineffectiveness of the state. It can be overcome only in conjunction with normalising the political process.*

Overview by country:

Syria. Syria has been in the grips of an acute crisis since March 2011, which negatively impacts international dynamics. Contrary to the position adopted by some countries and their media, the background of the events unfolding in Syria is very complicated and diverse.

The actions of some states seeking to achieve specific goals related to changing authoritarian regimes (in which they mistakenly saw the root of all problems) led to weaker state institutions in Syria, where the power void was filled with terrorism.

Iraq. Iraq has gone through an externally-induced attempt to overthrow an authoritarian regime and create a new prosperous nation. However, democracy failed to take root, but the internal religious balance was upset, statehood shattered, and one-third of the country has come under the control of ISIS¹. Iraq has become a hostage to the Shiite-Sunni conflict that is controlled from outside.

Libya. Despite the international community's efforts, radical improvement in the situation in Libya has yet to come about, although there is some progress that gives cause for optimism (for example, an agreement on national reconciliation has been signed). However, the situation is aggravated by the presence of ISIS. There are fears that if the situation is not stabilised in the near future, Libyan statehood will be permanently doomed.

Yemen. Confrontation and tension are clearly on the rise in Yemen. A serious political crisis continues. The humanitarian situation is faced with problems (although it improved a little recently). Reportedly, ISIS and al-Qaeda² are engaged in smuggling oil. The consultations held in Geneva with the participation of the UN have led nowhere, and new negotiations are nowhere in sight. There have been many attempts to start a political dialogue in Yemen, but the sides have failed to reach a compromise.

Iran. Any geopolitical involvement of a great power in the region (be it the United States or Russia) plays against the regional ambitions of Iran as a candidate for regional leadership. A question arises: how to balance a great power's presence with Iran's regional ambitions and its traditional relations with other countries in the region?

In Iran, there's a consensus with regard to the positive influence of the Russian presence in Syria, as it helps oppose ISIS. The understanding of big losses and lost opportunities due to poor relations with the United States is an important factor in that country's foreign policy discourse. In these circumstances, Tehran will not, of its own accord, do anything that could jeopardise its already fragile relations with Washington.

¹ *Extremist organisation banned in Russia.* – Ed.

² *Terrorist organisation banned in Russia.* – Ed.

Analytics

From a sociopolitical perspective, the Middle East today is an extremely diverse and, therefore, extremely complicated region. In the last decade, there have been many attempts to overcome state-to-state and intra-country conflicts and create sustainable stability and security. However, they have all failed. The dividing lines have remained and even become deeper amid new contradictions and crises.

The key challenges and threats to regional stability and progress can be conventionally divided into three groups: intra-country (erosion of the state), state-to-state (intra-regional contradictions), and the problem of terrorism. The latter forms a separate group, because it's outside the state framework.

Intra-country challenges are due to the transitional status of the Middle Eastern nations' state systems.

On the one hand, the people in these countries aren't yet objectively ready for democracy. This makes public institutions vulnerable in the face of existing and necessary internal reforms (such as fighting corruption or reforming sociopolitical life, etc.), when even secular authoritarian regimes are unable to maintain stability.

At the same time, these same institutions receive a blow from the outside, that is by a number of states seeking to act as exporters of democracy.

The Arab Spring, aka the Arab Awakening, is a case in point. The breach of the social contract between the state and society, which no longer corresponded to a rapidly changing reality, was common for the countries involved in this process. In each particular case, governance failures made the system's evolutionary transformation impossible, and a revolutionary regime change inevitable.

However, each case was quite unique, which made it impossible to use a common democratic approach to the region's problems and made Western policies ineffective and destructive.

The Middle Eastern countries' strong dependence on external influences exerts additional pressure on them. The region's resources lure in other states which, in turn, immerse in the local political processes so deeply as to morph into domestic actors. It is believed that the Middle Eastern countries cannot move toward an «awakening» with such a substantial foreign presence. Therefore, the countries of the region should assume primary responsibility for their internal balance, economic and political progress, updating their institutions with account taken of internal social specifics.

On a separate note, it is imperative to focus on socioeconomic problems, which have been exacerbated over the past 12 months and have gradually come to the fore. Many Middle Eastern countries, including oil-exporting countries, have budget deficits. There are also three other important deficit-ridden regional positions: 1) employment, 2) labor and 3) education. Food security and healthcare are also part of the agenda.

The regional policies increasingly taking on economic features and the creation of models of economic growth based on a broad social base and a balanced allocation of benefits can significantly bring down the degree of ethno-political and geopolitical conflicts. Based on its inherent features (the quality of human capital, the resource and industrial base), the Middle East still has great potential to move toward quality economic growth (including, in particular, high synergy prospects for uniting the industrial and research capabilities of Iran and Turkey and the resource base of the Gulf States). The utterly negative (and deteriorating) dynamics of the political processes act as a fundamental obstacle to such a transformation.

On the other hand, although the people of the Middle Eastern countries aren't adapted to a full-fledged democratic society, their transition and movement in this direction are imminent. Pluralism and inclusiveness of the political process form the foundation, which may and should help overcome the current internal crises.

This, in turn, brings up two important issues. When will these nations be ready for democracy, and who will be the one to decide on this? What have the authoritarian regimes done or what can they do to facilitate this process in evolutionary terms?

The answer to the first question may not be clear, but assessing their readiness for democracy and supporting/softly encouraging authoritarian regimes to do something in this area is possible.

The lack of alternative approaches to development is today's primary problem. Clearly, the Middle East is unable to find this path. Consequently, there is a need for a certain amount of external support. This applies to not only political, but also economic development, where a kind of a Marshall Plan for the Middle Eastern region – a roadmap for economic recovery – should not be ruled out. It is important to keep the balance between moving toward the desired goal and the stability of the state.

The Syrian experience of recent months has shown that this approach has good prospects. Especially, when it comes to a situation that has already spiraled out of government control.

The external parties with different interests have demonstrated their ability to agree on things, even if not on all issues. If a political settlement model in Syria is a success, it can and must be «exported» to other countries in the region (and even beyond).

There are two more important things we have learned in Syria.

First, rebuilding the country is a centralised process that must be balanced with the process of phasing out a strong authoritarian political system. Second, the first few years of the peace process are the most difficult and vulnerable for a country (this has been confirmed by Libya and to a lesser extent by Iraq and Egypt) that cannot cope with the mission of political renewal; therefore, this process needs to be carefully planned in advance.

In the foreseeable future, recovery from the economic and social devastation caused by destabilisation in the region (many of its roots can be traced back to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003) should be the primary goal of all the countries in the region and the international community as a whole. Without resolving this problem, the transition to a sustainable regional growth model will be doomed to failure, since the economic collapse in Syria and the economic plight in other countries are fraught with political risk.

Making this region part of Grand Eurasia may be another way of stabilising the Middle East and transforming it into a territory of sustainable growth. Including the Middle Eastern countries in various forms of regional economic integration can be a basis for normalising the situation and a prerequisite for greater investment and, consequently, better living standards. Since China is considered the main economic driver behind this process (even though its involvement in the political affairs of the Middle East is weak), it can have a major positive effect.

Devoid of political pressure, economic integration promises to be quite lucrative for a number of Middle Eastern countries, while the involvement of China and other major actors in the affairs of the region can contribute to a greater balance and a balance of power, as it smoothes over the current pressure from the West, to which Russia alone is a real counterweight.

The interstate challenges in the Middle East are related to several circumstances. First, the Middle East, as such, is divided along several lines – ethnic and religious, oil exporting and non-exporting countries, monarchies and secular regimes, etc. Various states often have opposing views on the region's future, which provokes tensions. Second, there are long-running conflicts that have not been resolved. Third, the aforementioned processes within these countries can provoke potential interference in the status quo. The weakening of the states in the region destabilises regional relations and encourages revisionist political forces.

Whereas foreign presence in intrastate affairs is a highly sensitive issue as an excessive foreign presence is undesirable based on the negative historical experience, the need for the involvement of external parties in dealing with interstate problems is more understandable. The Middle East desperately needs external assistance and mediation to overcome the conflicts that have built up over millennia. The region is hardly in a position

to cope with this on its own. However, assistance a) should not be imposed and b) should be consolidated to the maximum degree.

From this perspective, in addition to the differences between the Russian and Western positions, today, the following variables can be identified.

First, Russia-Iran relations. The countries in the region do not completely understand the essence of this – i.e., whether it is a situational rapprochement or a long-term and strategic partnership. The latter could drastically change the alignment of forces. Therefore, if Moscow wants to communicate with other Middle Eastern countries its policy in the region should be more balanced. Thus, Russia's strategic guideline is that it should be comprehensible to all countries in the Arab world and the Middle East.

Second, Saudi Arabia's position raises questions. The majority of Persian Gulf countries believe the kingdom's stability is important, among other things, for its own survival. Many countries regard Saudi Arabia as a model. So Riyadh should decisively fight the Islamic State and other forms of terrorism. So far, however, Saudi Arabia has exhibited a tendency toward destabilising the situation (as evidenced in Syria and Yemen). On the positive side, the Saudis have opened a dialogue with Iran, among other things, thanks to Russia's efforts. This dialogue should continue.

Third, Iran's position with regard to Saudi Arabia is essentially unchanged even if it remains restrained. According to the Iranians, the primary negative factor in the Middle East is Wahhabism and Salafi ideology. As Israel encourages radicalisation, the Saudis are the main sponsor of this process.

At the same time, the Iranians believe Saudi Arabia is not acting on behalf of the Sunni world. Yemen and other countries (for example, Oman) have begun to distance themselves from Riyadh. No one wants an explosion and disintegration, but everyone wants the export of Wahhabism to be terminated. Iran is determined to do its best to prevent foreign powers from deciding who Syria's president will be, (if Assad is not popular, this should be confirmed by the Syrian people, not the US State Department). At the same time [Baghdad] indicates that a rapprochement between the United States and Iran is possible, but the keys to this rapprochement are in Washington, which needs to review its policy in the region and exert pressure on its extremist allies.

Fourth, a number of Western countries (primarily the United States) are concerned about China's penetration in the Middle East. So far this process is of a fragmentary and purely economic nature. However, even now questions are being raised as to the limits of this penetration, proceeding from US interests. Obviously, even China's economic presence can change the status quo and affect the lineup of forces, especially considering that China's key economic partner today is Iran. Iran is also the top candidate for joining the Silk Road initiative.

The Israeli-Palestinian problem in the Middle East still exists, but amid other conflicts it is receding into the background. The focus of criticism is directed against Israel's policy towards dividing the Palestinian territory and establishing settlements there, which impedes the formation of a single Palestinian state.

According to the Palestinians, a resolution to the conflict is hindered by the following: 1) the way the Israelis see this problem (God's chosen people, a victim of the conflict); 2) the imbalance of force (the international community is not prepared to exert pressure on Israel); 3) Israel's shortsighted policy (the conflict should be managed, not resolved).

The problem of terrorism is nothing new for the Middle East. Nevertheless, for a long time, the parties' actions have essentially counterbalanced each other, and in fact, nothing was done to fight this evil. Meanwhile, the key question here is, what provided the basis for the emergence of terrorist groups, why they came about and why their popularity is growing. After all, radical organisations still have a social base for their activities. If terrorism is defined as reaction to injustice then the key to resolving the problem is to ensure stability and justice in the countries in the region.

It is critical to destroy the foundations of terrorism and fight it while at the same time normalising the political process.

There is a general understanding that terrorist groups must be eliminated and it is not clear why it is taking so long to fight ISIS.

One theory is that fighting ISIS is not a priority for the majority of those involved (contrary to their declarations). Another reason is the lack of alternative ideas to stabilise the situation in the area after ISIS goes.

In addition, international cooperation is still an issue. Possibly, political counterterrorism efforts should be focused less on terrorism as such (who is legitimate and who is not), and more on a search for a balance of interests between regional participants and stakeholders.

Yet another problem is that in most cases a terrorist group has a certain state behind it. It is bad that the actions of such groups – terrorist groups and their sponsors – are in one way or another related to geopolitics. In the case of the Middle East, this concerns the West.

By contrast, Russia is seen by a number of countries of the region as the only force that is totally dedicated to fighting terrorism per se. For others, this fight is a means to other ends.

The search for **new security architecture in the Middle East** is compounded by these three challenges. All regional actors, as well as extra-regional ones, agree that a new security system is vital. However, they disagree on the specifics – sometimes fundamentally.

Russian experts have highlighted the need to develop a common stabilisation strategy for the region. The following proposals were put forward:

- *resurrecting the Russian proposal (from the early 2000s) regarding the creation of a security subsystem in the Persian Gulf, which could be extended to the entire region;*
- *using the experience of the working group on arms control and regional security that was established at a meeting of US, Russian and Middle Eastern foreign ministries (1992–1996). The group provided an effective platform for developing collective security measures in the region (a monitoring system, promoting military contacts);*
- *external sponsorship (Russian-US co-sponsorship appears preferable);*
- *using the experimental experience in developing guidelines for police operations in Palestinian autonomy;*
- *using a peacekeeping summit model (that took place in March 1996) to establish a similar platform to deal with the present situation;*
- *using the recent experience in the elimination of chemical weapons;*
- *work on Iran's nuclear dossier.*

US experts basically agree with the initiative to reinstate the working group but propose shifting the focus to other security dimensions (health safety, work safety, food security, and the humanitarian situation generally). They note the need to transform the education system in the region and the importance of physical security not only in relations between states but also on the people-to-people level. Following them the personal security issue makes this problem an essential component of any discussion on regional security. This is obviously an attempt to drag out the Russian initiatives on the same principle as with regard to reforming the European security system.

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www.valdaiclub.com

valdai@valdaiclub.com



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