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CRUCIAL PLAYERS OR INSUFFICIENT POWERS? THE USA, RUSSIA AND THE EU IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

Russian military operation in Syria, launched September 30th, 2015, and the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS,¹ as well as the EU frantic attempts to address mounting refugee crisis and control migration flows are all focused on the threats originated from the Middle East. Despite their differences, all three players demonstrate genuine concern regarding the region, which throughout the last decades repeatedly became the focus of desperate diplomatic efforts and painful intrusions by major powers.

What differentiates the Middle East from other regions and increases its significance in international affairs is a combination of intense multidimensional enmities, violent conflicts and ability to originate threats, which affect societies well beyond its traditional boundaries. Meanwhile, today, the region is also seen as one of the competitive battleground in relations between Russia and the West. This external rivalry menaces to complicate existing struggles, the same way the Cold War resonated local issues across the globe a quarter century ago.

More specifically, Western leadership portrays Moscow as a spoiler trying to undermine American and European support of progressive forces across the region². Russia, on the other hand, expresses its frustration with the destabilizing effect of the Western intervention regional and global security³. In this context, while current developments in the Middle East triggered extensive discussions of their individual policies and bilateral

interactions, the current report aspires to assess them through comparative perspective and interactive dynamics.

Its purpose is to expose interests of the three players in the Middle East as well as alteration in their strategies in the rapidly changing regional landscape. It strives to identify possible ways for them to contribute to stability in the area through cooperative activities. The author claims that the U.S., Russia and the EU are dissatisfied with the overall direction, in which the Middle East is heading, but could hardly affect current unfavorable trends in any meaningful way without coordination.

The report identifies that in recent years the primary role in shaping the Middle Eastern politics shifted from powerful outsiders to local actors. It then demonstrates that neither the U.S., nor Russia, nor the EU possess capabilities and will to shape and maintain even rudimentary regional order. Finally, it claims that despite popular representation of the Middle East as another area of power struggle between Moscow and the West, there are important prerequisites for cooperation between them even amid intensive mutual mistrust.

The report demonstrates that outside powers could play a useful role in relaxing security dilemmas through establishment of inclusive channels for dialogue. It also argues that partial harmonization of signaling for the local actors is needed to address the challenge of fractured social foundations of the Middle Eastern politics and to prevent new advancement of violent extremists⁴.

¹ *Organization banned in Russia.* – **Editor's Note.**

² *Obama B. Press Conference by the President. 02.10.2015.* URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president>

³ *Путин В.В. Выступление на международной конференции по безопасности в Мюнхене. 10.02.2007.* URL: http://archive.kremlin.ru/appears/2007/02/10/1737_type63374type63376ty-re63377type63381type82634_118097.shtml; *Путин В.В. Выступление на заседании Международного дискуссионного клуба «Валдай».* 24.10.2014. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>.

⁴ *There is a continuous argument regarding correct title for numerous groups, which pursue radical political ideology, built upon certain interpretation of religious texts, and apply violence to advance their strategic purposes. Some of the versions include Jihadists and radical Islamists. In the current report they are presented under the notion of violent extremists.*

Transforming Strategic Landscape in the Greater Middle East

Throughout much of the 20th and even in the early years of the 21st centuries, the patterns of conflict and cooperation in the Middle East were to a significant degree shaped by powers external for the region. After the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, Britain and France consolidated their dominance through the mandate system. In the second half of the century they were replaced by the two superpowers – the Soviet Union and the U.S. – bolstering their influence through formal and informal alliances across the Middle East.

The collapse of a bipolar system was followed by a much more straightforward political and military engagement of the United States in the Middle East. An apex of the American presence manifested in the Iraq war of 2003–2011⁵, which brought the region in the centre not merely for its foreign policy, but also domestic politics in Washington⁶. This rise preceded successive detachment due to the deep frustration with the results of Washington's activities.

Whether it were colonial powers, Soviet-American rivalry or the U.S. hegemony, external influence could not reach the level of unconditional domination. Nevertheless, it was powerful enough to suppress, channel or localize regional enmities in the interests of external powers and to provide elements of regional order. Since the late 2000s with the partial American withdrawal from the Middle East, the local players retained greater ability to determine regional politics on their own⁷. Historical grievances, geopolitical rivalries and ideological clashes, which never disappeared from the agenda, are able to manifest themselves more freely than before.

⁵ Walt St. *The United States Should Admit It No Longer Has a Middle East Policy*. *Foreign Policy*. January 29, 2016. URL: <http://foreign-policy.com/2016/01/29/the-u-s-should-admit-it-has-no-middle-east-policy-obama-cold-war-israel-syria/>.

⁶ Howell W.G., Kriner D.L. *Congress, the President, and the Iraq War's Domestic Political Front // Congress Reconsidered / ed. by L. Dodd, B. Oppenheimer*. Washington: CQ Press, 2009. P. 311–335; Douthat R. *The Iraq War and Domestic Politics*. *The New York Times*. 25.03.2013. URL: http://douthat.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/the-iraq-war-and-domestic-politics/?_r=0; Maccarthy D. *How the Iraq War Realigned American Politics*. *The American Conservative*. 24.03.2013. URL: <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/mccarthy/how-the-iraq-war-realigned-american-politics/>.

⁷ Корольков Л. *Меняющаяся геометрия ближневосточных раскладов // Международные процессы*. 2015. Том 13, №1. С. 97–106. DOI 10.17994/IT.2015.13.40.8.

This looser external environment implied that stability in the Middle East relies on the ability of regional players to coordinate and maintain basic rules of political competition. Unfortunately, they proved to be underprepared and simply incapable to provide such kind of framework. The deficiency of actorness in the Middle East was never as evident, as in the context of the “Arab Spring”, which was initially perceived as a testimony of the ability of the intraregional forces to define their own fate⁸.

Although, in some countries (such as Turkey or Iran, for example) state-centric nationalism remains the centerpiece of popular identity, in much of the region the nationalist forces were not able to deliver on the promise of democratization and prosperity, they proclaimed in the 1950s–1960s. The political uprisings of 2010–2011 manifested a failure of secular nationalism in the form it was preached by leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser and his successors in other Middle Eastern countries⁹.

It is quite illustrative that popular protests of the “Arab Spring” reached the highest levels in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen, which experienced attempts of political modernization, although, in the authoritarian form. They were much less successful Saudi Arabia, for example, which remained reliant on traditional forms of legitimacy. Across the Middle East Western-minded youth pressed for a liberal-democratic alternative. The record of the states, which experienced political upheaval since 2010 in the region proved that it is not powerful enough, to provide national consolidation.

The significant gap in the sources of political consolidation is filled by other types of social identities. They include both universalist religious appeals and particularist clannish allegiances¹⁰, which often receive transnational meaning. Historical rivalries between Sunni and Shia appeared

⁸ Aliboni R. *The International Dimension of the Arab Spring // The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*. 2011. Vol. 46, No. 4. P. 5–9. DOI:10.1080/03932729.2011.637712; Dabashi H. *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*. London: ZedBooks, 2012.

⁹ See, Наумкин В.В. *Вместо предисловия: круговорот арабского пробуждения // Ближний Восток, Арабское пробуждение и Россия: что дальше? / Отв. ред-ры: В.В. Наумкин, В.В. Попов, В.А. Кузнецов*. М.: ИВРАН, 2012. С. 4–5.

¹⁰ Lust E., Waldner D. *Parties, Polarization, and Transition in the Arab World*. *Strauss Working Paper*. 2014. P. 4.

to be mobilized for the political purpose¹¹ and played significant role in the conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, as well as in political tensions in Bahrain.

However, intra-Sunni differences, which include groups sympathetic to the causes of Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS and Al-Qaeda¹², have destabilizing effect in even broader number of cases¹³. They not only fueled destabilization in Egypt, Libya and Syria, but also created concerns for the Gulf States, are torn between applying them to fight what they see as Iran-led Shia subversion and balancing their potential popularity in their own societies.

Meanwhile, the war in Libya and, in particular, the length of the defense of Sirte by Magariha and other Pro-Qaddafi tribes after the fall of Tripoli¹⁴, demonstrates significance of traditional blood ties in regional politics. Similar example could be found in the case of Yemen, which was in a substantial way defined by interclan relations and tribal allegiances¹⁵.

The complexity of overlapping patronage networks and sectarian identities used to be underestimated by the outside powers before to the detrimental effect to their interests in the region¹⁶. However, it is weakening of the appeal of the imported Western ideologies (be it Nationalism, Socialism or Liberalism), which makes them especially attractive in the unstable environment of the current Middle East.

The struggle between different sources of political consolidation, such as ethnic and civil Nationalism, various sorts of Political Islam and tribalism tear regional societies from inside and supplement traditional interstate security dilemmas with internal dimension. The interlinks between

these fears are clearly expressed in the Saudi Arabia concerns regarding potential subversion of Shia in its Eastern province by Tehran¹⁷; Turkish attribution of Kurdish attacks to the encouragement from Damask¹⁸; as well as Iranian worries regarding external inspiration for liberal activism¹⁹.

Combination of weakening external restraints interstate rivalries and deep societal dissatisfaction produced in the last several years growing instability across the Middle East. It is manifested, most clearly in continuous struggles in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan, but spreads to other countries as well. Mutual mistrust and shared insecurity is not conducive to cooperation in the region.

However, the very extent of hostilities in the Middle East requires states to transfer from ad hoc coalitions and temporal allegiances to more solid blocks²⁰. This tendency is clearly demonstrated by evolution of Qatari strategy, for example, which evolved from attempts to take more assertive and autonomous stance in 2010–2013 to the greater reliance on relations with Saudis²¹. As a result, it is possible to identify three major alliances in the region:

1. *Iran-centric coalition, sealed by fears of Sunni-radicalism among the regional religious and ethnic minorities. It incorporates governments both in Baghdad and Damask, as well as Lebanese Hezbollah, but it is also looked for by Shia and some of the Christian groups across the region.*

¹⁷ Mlkail B. *Sectarianism after the Arab spring: an exaggerated spectre*. FRIDE Policy Brief. No. 131. June 2012. URL: http://fride.org/descarga/PB_131_Sectarianism_after_arab_spring.pdf.

¹⁸ Martel F. *Turkey: PKK, ISIS Reached Deal with Assad to Bomb Ankara Kurdish Event*. 16.10.2015. URL: <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/10/16/turkey-pkk-isis-reached-deal-with-assad-to-bomb-ankara-kurdish-event/>.

¹⁹ Ahren R. *Khamenei aims to ensure Iran deal won't lead to regime change*. 22.07.2015. URL: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-aims-to-ensure-iran-deal-wont-lead-to-regime-change/>.

²⁰ Dalacoura K. *The Arab Uprisings Two Years On: Ideology, Sectarianism and the Changing Balance of Power in the Middle East / Insight Turkey*. 2013. Vol. 15, No. 1. P. 75–89.

²¹ Black I. *Qatar-Gulf deal forces expulsion of Muslim Brotherhood leaders*. *Guardian*. 16.09.2014. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/16/qatar-orders-expulsion-exiled-egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-leaders>.

¹¹ Al-Rasheed M. *Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring // Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. 2011. Vol. 11, No. 3. P. 513–526.

¹² *Organization banned in Russia. – Editor's Note.*

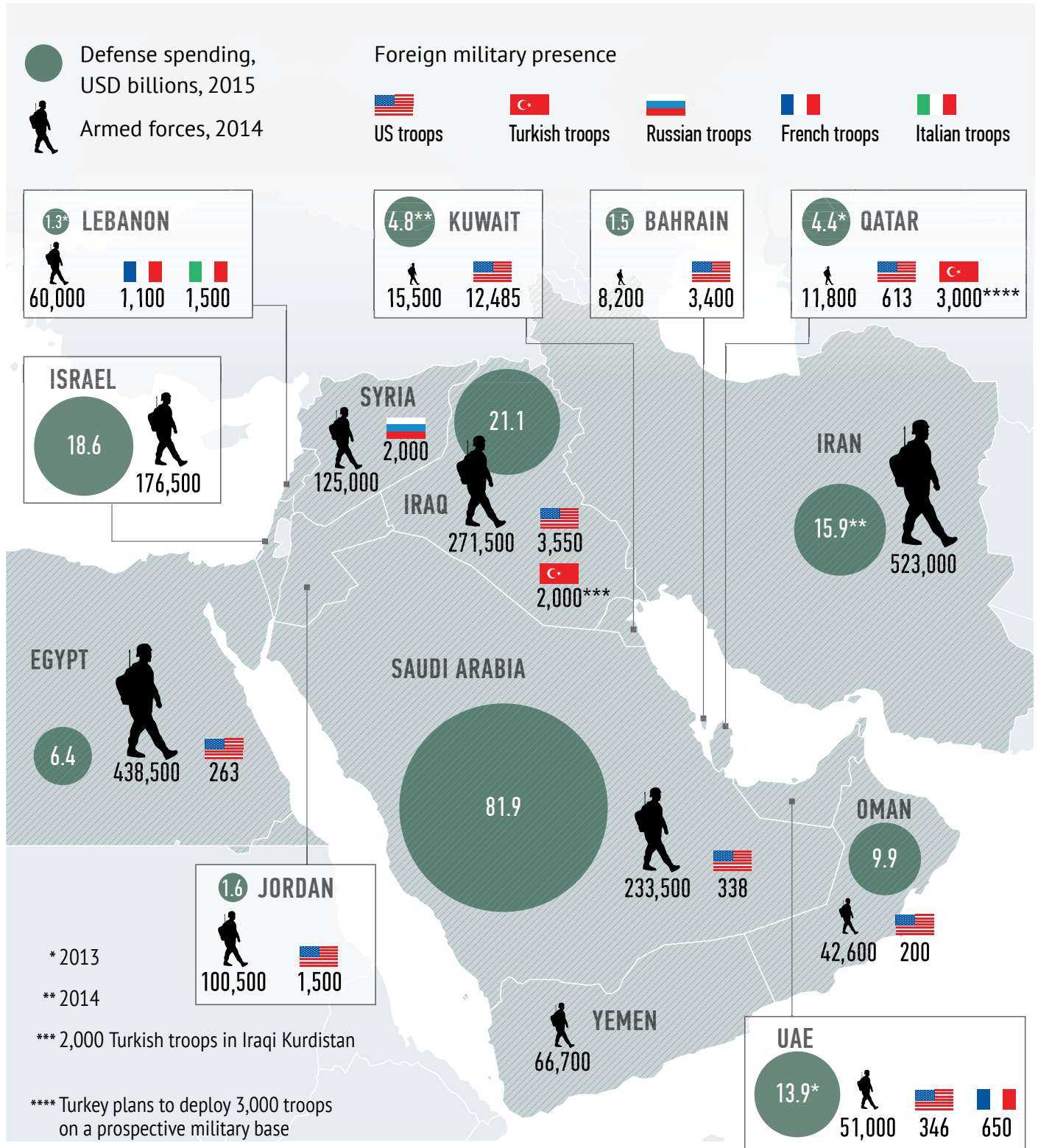
¹³ Byman D. *Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East // Survival*. 2014. Vol. 56, No. 1. P. 79–100. DOI:10.1080/00396338.2014.882157.

¹⁴ Sorenson K., Damidez N. *Fragments of an Army. Three Aspects of the Libya Collapse // The NATO Intervention in Libya. Lessons Learned from the Campaign / K. Engelbrekt, M. Mohlin, Ch. Wagnsson*. Oxon: Routledge, 2014. P. 161.

¹⁵ Hermann R. *A Yemeni Tribal Affair*. URL: <https://en.qantara.de/content/power-struggle-in-yemen-a-yemeni-tribal-affair>.

¹⁶ Marten K. *Warlords: Strong-arm brokers in weak states*. N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012. P. 139–186.

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Sources: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, United States Department of Defense, RBC.ru

2. *An alliance of Arab countries concerned by the rise of Iranian power as well as ISIS and led by Saudi Arabia. It received formal expression in December 2015 as an anti-terrorist coalition, which incorporates not only Gulf states, but also Egypt, multiple Sunni militia across the region, as well as extra-regional Muslim countries, such as Malaysia, Nigeria and most notably Pakistan*²².
3. *Radical extremists, which are represented primarily by ISIS and associated groups. While Jihadist forces still represent a loose community and there is continuous struggle between ISIS-led and Al-Qaeda-centered networks, in the last two years the former clearly strengthened its lead among similar organizations. As for March 2016, it is estimated to receive pledges of allegiances from more than 40 various groups across the Globe*²³.

The current consolidation of the blocks fuels tensions between their participants as it establishes clear dividing lines and deprive regional architecture from previous flexibility. It is not yet finalized, however. For example, Turkey which now clearly

identifies itself with the Sunni-Arab coalition, due to its demographic size, economic resources, military capabilities and political ambitions could aspire to position itself as an independent power center with its own regional agenda. This is even more likely, as such kind of desires were very much present in 2010–2011 in the early days of “Arab Spring”, when Turkey tried to advertise its own record of moderate Islamism.

Another important qualification is related to the radical extremist network. All the disadvantages of its loose nature are compensated by the lack of reliance on any specific organizational form. While the mounting pressure on ISIS could lead to its devastation and disintegration, it would most likely mean that another group would be able to replace it in some relatively short time “daesh” itself supplanted Al-Qaeda before.

Therefore, while growing consolidation of ideological blocks should be an immediate source of concern in the Middle East, fractured social foundations of political order remains a more distant challenge. In order to prevent the region from creating new threats to the global security, the major powers should find ways to address both problems at once. This work, however, is complicated by divergence of their interests and self-imposed restrictions.

The U.S. “Half-Court” Position

Throughout 2000s, the U.S. engagement in the Middle East remained the principal driving force of regional dynamics. Their most important activities included operations in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as attempts to foster dialogue between Israel and Palestine and to contain Iran. It also continued to provide significant funds to the regional partners both in forms of economic assistance and military

support. Since 2004, the “Greater Middle East” initiative created a normative framework for American policy focused on promotion of political modernization and civil rights in the region²⁴. Relatively modest in substance, it attracted significant attention as a practical representation of the “Freedom Agenda” passionately preached by Bush administration²⁵.

²² Saudi Arabia forms Muslim ‘anti-terrorism’ coalition. 15.12.2015. URL: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/saudi-arabia-forms-muslim-anti-terrorism-coalition-151215035914865.html>.

²³ Seftel B. ISIS: The New Face of Global Jihad? The CIPHER Brief. 18.03.2016. URL: <http://thecipherbrief.com/article/middle-east/isis-new-face-global-jihad/>.

²⁴ President Bush’s “Greater Middle East Partnership Initiative”, U.S. Working Paper For G-8. URL: March 15, 2004. URL: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/AlHayat%20Article.pdf>.

²⁵ Fact Sheet: President Bush’s Freedom Agenda Helped Protect The American People. URL: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/freedomagenda/>.

American interests in the Middle East, behind these policies, remained diverse and complex. However, it is still questionable whether they were sufficient to justify the level of Washington's investment in terms of people's lives, money and political attention. The United States viewed the region as a primary source of both WMD proliferation and terrorism²⁶ – the two security threats, which Washington identified as the most significant in the absence of formidable adversary in world politics.

As a hegemonic power, the U.S. also felt responsible for provision of global public goods, especially flow of crucial commodities, such as oil, to the international markets. This was perceived not just a right thing to do, but an expression of national interest²⁷. At the end of the day, any volatility in this field would become detrimental to American economy. Finally, an outstanding prestige of the U.S. power relied on its ability to maintain security guarantees to its multiple allies and partners. Washington's obsession with credibility appeared especially strong in its relations with Israel, but it was also present in its dealings with Saudis and other Gulf countries as well as Egypt²⁸.

By 2007, however, the devastating effect of the U.S. policies on the national power and international standing became already evident. Henceforth, Washington engaged in a long and painful process of withdrawal from unbearable commitments. Although, it tried to reassure its regional allies that it would continue to provide diplomatic and material assistance, it took much more hands off approach to regional rivalries²⁹.

²⁶ Bush G.W. 2002 State of the Union Adress. 29.01.2002. URL: <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>; Bush G.W. Remarks at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy. 06.11.2003. URL: <http://www.ned.org/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary/>.

²⁷ National Energy Policy. *Reliable, Affordable and Environmentally Sound Energy for America's Future. Report of the National Energy Policy Development Group*. May 2001. URL: http://www.netl.doe.gov/publications/press/2001/nep/national_energy_policy.pdf. P. 8–3 – 8–5.

²⁸ Walt St. *The Credibility Addiction*. *Foreign Policy*. 06.01.2015. URL: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/06/the-credibility-addiction-us-iraq-afghanistan-unwinnable-war/>.

²⁹ Lynch M. *Obama and the Middle East. Rightsizing the U.S. Role // Foreign Affairs*. September/October 2015.

The popular uprising of 2010–2011 caught the American leadership by surprise. It resonated its own rhetoric of political liberation from a previous decade and, therefore, could not be ignored. It, however, increased the danger of the very kind of entanglement the U.S. desperately wanted to escape³⁰. As a result, the U.S. partners seeking to exploit the protests in their own favor perceived its actions as too cautious, but at the same time they strengthened suspicion among those who were unhappy with the American record of regime change.

The outcomes of the Libyan civil war of 2011, which transformed this country into a failed state and, especially, succeeding attack on the American mission in Benghazi in 2012 alerted Obama administration to the complexity of the challenges it faces with the massive popular mobilization. Its greater caution became evident in the continuous Syrian conflict since 2011, in which it demonstrated deep reluctance to engage militarily, despite powerful hawkish lobby in Washington³¹.

In contrast to the unilateral American actions of the mid-2000s, the Obama administration attempted to elaborate more consensual approach, built upon coordination with European and Middle Eastern partners³². It did not preclude necessarily disagreements on specific issues. For example, the U.S. was eager to disregard Israeli and Saudi opposition towards the nuclear deal with Iran. Yet, on some occasions, Washington found itself obliged to provide reassurances of loyalty to its allies. Both in

³⁰ For the detailed discussion on the administration deliberations in these circumstances, see Mann J. *The Obamians*. N.Y.: Penguin, 2012. P. 270–301.

³¹ McDonnell P.J. *U.S. Sen. John McCain: Could it be time to intervene in Syria?* *LA Times*. 23.10.2011. URL: http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/world_now/2011/10/us-syria-john-mccain-military-action.html; Menendez T. *Remarks at the Hearing on Authorization of Use of Military Force in Syria*. 03.09.2013. URL: <http://www.menendez.senate.gov/news-and-events/press/chairman-menendez-opening-remarks-at-the-hearing-on-authorization-of-use-of-military-force-in-syria>; Slaughter A.-M. *Stopping the Syria Contagion*. 18.01.2014. URL: <https://www.princeton.edu/~slaughtr/Articles/ProjectSyndicate.1.18.2014.pdf>; Ignatieff M. *With Syria, Diplomacy Needs Force*. *The New York Times*. 25.02.2014. URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/26/opinion/with-syria-diplomacy-needs-force.html?_r=0.

³² Obama B. *Remarks on Iraq and Afghanistan*. *The New York Times*. 15.07.2008. URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/15/us/politics/15text-obama.html?_r=0.

Libya and in Syria it allowed to be convinced to take stronger stance by more assertive regional states.

The U.S. halfhearted support upset some of its traditional partners such as Israel, Turkey, but most of all, perhaps, Saudi Arabia³³, which realized that they need to be more self-reliant. Meanwhile, its mixed signaling towards less friendly powers, caused to a significant extent, by lack of consensus in Washington itself, left them unconvinced about its eventual intentions. In the case of Iran specifically, the recent thaw in relations could be seen not so much as a genuine rapprochement, rather than a sophisticated way to affect internal balance within this country to support more reform-minded and less anti-Western elites³⁴.

In the end, an American strategy in the Middle East nowadays is more balanced than it was a decade ago. The lighter footprint does not necessarily mean that the U.S. discards the use of its military capabilities. Both the war in Libya and air campaign against ISIS, as well as raids against specific terrorist targets³⁵ are examples of the opposite. The network of military installations across the region³⁶ in combination with air carrier groups secures Washington the status of primary military power of the Middle East. Nevertheless, the amount of capabilities actually invested is more appropriate to the actual value for the U.S. strategic interests.

However, Washington needs to deal with more delicate equilibrium between the risk of losing trust of its multiple audiences and the danger of

being entangled by its own alliances. The U.S. is still studying how to rely on diplomacy rather to apply crude force. Its polarized and ideological domestic discourse sometimes also complicates elaboration of strategic priorities.

This political stumble was never more evident than in Syria, where it took Washington significant time to resolve between the two hardly compatible goals: to create a unified front against radical extremists and to facilitate transition from a minority Alawite-led regime to a more representative government. It seems that only direct Russian intervention paved the way for combining both priorities of the Obama administration. While ISIS is put under increasing pressure both in Iraq and in Syria, the Assad government faces increasing pressure to achieve compromise with various opposition factions through dialogue³⁷.

The challenge for the U.S. is that despite its best efforts, due to its both security interests and credibility considerations, it cannot disengage from the Middle East completely. Nevertheless, it does not possess neither recognition, nor capabilities, nor will to impose the regional order it will be comfortable with. It was barely feasible in the 1990s at the zenith of the American hegemony. It is even less achievable today.

Meanwhile, the current trends in the region are hardly reassuring for Washington, as the growing polarization in the region, provokes demands by its allies to revoke its formal and informal security guarantees. Due to its dependence on their good will in lending locations for the American military infrastructure and its respective importance for the U.S. to remain a Eurasian power, it cannot reject these pledges easily³⁸. However, recent cases demonstrate that in cooperation with other outside power (such as Russia) it could share responsibility for the offshore balancing without ameliorating confidence of regional players.

³³ Trofimov Y. *America's Fading Footprint in the Middle East*. *The Wall Street Journal*. 09.10.2015. URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/america-fading-footprint-in-the-middle-east-1444411954>

³⁴ Ahren R. *Khamenei aims to ensure Iran deal won't lead to regime change*. 22.07.2015. URL: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-aims-to-ensure-iran-deal-wont-lead-to-regime-change/>.

³⁵ Starr B., Perez E., Botelho G. *U.S. military forces strike in Libya, Somalia; capture wanted al Qaeda leader*. *CNN*. 06.10.2013. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/05/world/africa/us-forces-africa-terrorist-raids/>.

³⁶ *The U.S. Central Command responsible for the Greater Middle East enlists more than 40 thousand troops in its area of responsibility (see, Zorthian J. This Graphic Shows Where U.S. Troops Are Stationed Around the World*. *Time*. 16.10.2015. URL: <http://time.com/4075458/afghanistan-drawdown-obama-troops/>). Moreover, recently leaked documents identify plans to establish new facilities in the region (see, Mazzetti M., Schmitt E. *Pentagon Seeks to Knit Foreign Bases Into ISIS-Foiling Network*. *The New York Times*. 10.12.2015. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/11/us/politics/pentagon-seeks-string-of-overseas-bases-to-contain-isis.html>).

³⁷ *The announcement of Russian partial withdrawal from Syria seems to send a strong incentive for the Syrian authorities to engage with their opponents in a meaningful way (see, Путин В.В. Встреча с Сергеем Лавровым и Сергеем Шойгу*. 14.03.2016. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/4>).

³⁸ *The logic of this argument was presented at length in Brooks S. G., Ikenberry G. J., Wohlforth W. C. Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment // International Security*. 2012/2013. Vol. 37, No. 3. P. 7–51.

Reluctant Russian Strategic Evolution

Russian foreign policy is often evaluated through comparison with its Soviet predecessor³⁹. Nowhere this association is as much misleading as in the case of the Middle East. Throughout the 2000s, Russia attempted to avoid the failure of falling into a trap once hitting the Soviet Union – to rely on a handful of greedy and unreliable allies and alienate the rest of the players in the region.

Under condition of intense rivalry and deep mutual mistrust among the states and non-state actors in the Middle East Moscow managed to construct a fragile architecture of constructive, but not too close relations with almost each significant regional player⁴⁰. Its primary priority remained to stay “above the fight”, and occasionally to provide good services of an “honest broker” of multiple parties. In order to retain this position Russia needed to avoid binding itself to specific political forces in the region through extensive commitment, similar to the U.S. alliances.

In spite, Moscow secured a privilege to communicate with those parties, which were non-grata for Washington, but still could not be ignored in regional deliberations. This position provided freedom of strategic maneuver and international leverage, notwithstanding very limited economic and military capacities it was able to project across the Middle East. This strategy brought it rapprochement and cooperation with countries ranging from Iran and Syria to Israel and Turkey. It also managed to extend dialogue with various Palestinian factions despite their deep-seated animosity towards each other. For the short period after 2001 it even found ways to engage in somewhat positive relations with the Gulf states.

This delicate network of associations was created in service of one overarching security goal as well as some economic benefits. Russia perceived an increasing threat from religiously motivated radical extremism since 1990s both on its own soil and across the vitally important Post-Soviet space. Therefore, it strived to preclude or diminish external

support of these groups in terms of funds, people, competences and ideology from the outside⁴¹.

As the lack of governance in a Greater Middle East remained the feeding ground for the extremist organizations around the globe, Moscow felt obliged to support any player that was able to contribute to the regional stability. Regardless of specific ideological orientation, autocratic regimes in Cairo, Damask and Tehran, moderate Islamists in Ankara and Gaza, as well as traditional monarchs in Amman and the Gulf were seen as acceptable partners as long as they shared Russian concerns regarding radical Jihadists.

Quite remarkably, that after the beginning of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 the Russian President Vladimir Putin confessed that Moscow viewed this operation as a mistake, yet, he admitted American failure would not be in Russia’s best interests⁴². Despite its outrage with Washington’s readiness to trade predictability of the established authorities (whatever deficiencies they had) for illusionary moral satisfaction of spreading democratic inspirations, Moscow strived to engage in cooperative relations with the U.S.

Russia also benefited from widening economic relations with the Middle East. While own abundant reserves of Arab countries and Iran precluded supplies of Moscow’s main export– energy products, Russia appeared to be quite competitive in manufacturing, including atomic energy, space launches, auto industry and certainly arms supplies. The Middle East also emerged as a primary destination for the Russian trade in agricultural products⁴³.

By the end of the 2000s, Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Syria and Turkey were all valuable trading partners for Moscow beyond oil and gas sectors. The most striking example, however, was Israel, which was appreciated by Russia due to its technological potential. Despite its close allegiance with the Washington, Tel-Aviv not only refused to join

⁴¹ Путин В.В. Расширенное заседание коллегии Министерства обороны. 11.12.2015. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50913>.

⁴² Путин В.В. Интервью представителям СМИ Центрального Черноземья. 02.04.2003. URL: <http://special.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21952>.

⁴³ Байков А.А., Истомин И.А. Неожиданные партнеры России на Ближнем и Среднем Востоке // *Международные процессы*. 2013. №2. С. 121–128.

³⁹ See, for example, Lo B. *Russia and the New World Disorder*. Washington: Brookings, 2015.

⁴⁰ Katz M. *Russia’s Greater Middle East Policy: Securing Economic Interests, Courting Islam*. *Russie.Nei.Visions* No. 49. IFRI. April 2010. URL: <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifjirussiamid-dleeastkatzengapril2010.pdf>.

coordinated Western sanctions against Moscow after Ukraine crisis, it moved rather aggressively to launch negotiations on preferential trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union⁴⁴.

The “Arab Spring” revealed major deficiencies in the Russian strategy. It helped Moscow to acquire more recognition than its raw capabilities would predict and made less reliant on any single partnership, but it could not cure from dependence on the overall structural organization in the region. Once the fractured and floating network of rivalries and allegiances in the Middle East started to harden into more solid coalitions and clear dividing lines, the position “above the fight” became ever less sustainable.

The early example of the limitations of Russian strategy was rapid deterioration of relations with Qatar. Disagreements regarding the future of Libya caused not only cooling rhetoric, but also initiated diplomatic scandal with physical assault on Russian ambassador in Doha and his later recall back to Moscow⁴⁵. However, it was Syrian conflict, which caused the most significant polarization in the region and shaken Russian policy of inclusive benevolence. The most obvious victim of that appeared to be Russian-Turkish relations.

As early as in October 2012 tensions regarding the future of the Assad government raised to a point, where Ankara landed a civil airplane flying from Moscow to Damask suspected in transferring of military equipment⁴⁶. Although, Russian-Turkish relations experienced unanticipated Renaissance in 2014, built upon prospects of mutually beneficial energy cooperation, disagreements over Moscow’s military involvement in support of Damask eventually prevailed and caused break up in relations. The latter was triggered by the Turkish downing of the Russian military plane in November 2015⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ Жандарова И. Россия и Израиль создадут зону свободной торговли. *Российская газета*. 12.02.2016. URL: <http://rg.ru/2016/02/12/rossiia-i-izrail-sozhdadut-zonu-svobodnoj-torgovli.html>.

⁴⁵ РФ понижает уровень дипотношений с Катаром из-за инцидента с послом РФ. *РИА Новости*. 05.12.2011. URL: <http://ria.ru/world/20111205/507109468.html>.

⁴⁶ Черененко Е., Сафонов И. Турецкопойманные. *Коммерсантъ*. 12.10.2012. URL: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2042264>

⁴⁷ Turkey’s downing of Russian warplane – what we know. *BBC*. 01.12.2015. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581>.

Surprisingly Russian activities have not so far caused similar strain in its relations with the Gulf states. Quite the opposite, the 2015 witnessed extensive exchange of visits on the ministerial level and lucrative investment offerings by Riyadh in exchange for Moscow’s retreat on Syria⁴⁸. Moreover, early in 2016 the two major energy-producing states engaged in dialogue on stabilizing oil market⁴⁹.

Although, much of the cooperation initiatives have not been implemented precisely due to the political disagreements, yet, the very intensity of dialogue demonstrates increased Russian prestige and diplomatic leverage as a result of its stance on Syria and its major role in securing deal on Iranian nuclear program⁵⁰. It created perception among regional players that Moscow cannot be easily ignored, sidelined or underestimated in the messy Middle Eastern politics⁵¹. Its military operation since Autumn 2015 boosted its reputation as a loyal partner and a reliable security provider. Appreciation of this fact is reflected in the eagerness of the smaller Gulf states, Egypt and Algeria to develop further economic ties with Russia.

However, both its position towards Sunni-radicalism and growing economic cooperation with Iran⁵² bound it further to a single camp in the regional struggle. This represents a clear departure from equidistant position it enjoyed in the 2000s. Although, Russian announcement of partial withdrawal from Syria was viewed positively by the Saudi-led coalition, there are no clear prospects for regaining strategic freedom and regional connectivity

⁴⁸ Саудовская Аравия инвестирует в экономику России \$10 млрд, сообщает пресс-служба Российского фонда прямых инвестиций (РФПИ). 07.07.2015. URL: <http://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/59685>.

⁴⁹ Khan M. Hopes of Saudi-Russian entente sends oil price rocketing. *The Telegraph*. 28.01.2016. URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/oilprices/12128514/Oil-prices-rocket-on-hopes-of-Saudi-Russian-entente.html>.

⁵⁰ Obama Thanks Putin for Russia’s Role in Iran Nuclear Deal. 16.07.2015. URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-russia-call-idUSKCNOPP2R120150716>.

⁵¹ Suchkov M.A. Russia’s Plan for the Middle East. *The National Interest*. 15.01.2016. URL: <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-plan-the-middle-east-14908>.

⁵² Herszernhron D. Russia Quickly Maneuvers to Capitalize on Iran Nuclear Deal. 14.07.2015. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/world/europe/russia-quickly-maneuvers-to-capitalize-on-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

it possessed few years ago. Furthermore, the feud with Turkey (however internally troubled the latter is) puts Moscow at odds with one of the main regional powers and the country, which is important to Russia for geographical and logistical reasons.

As a result, Russia finds itself in much stronger political position, despite the fact that economic and military capabilities it could deploy in the region remain limited. It also lost to some extent in regional diplomatic connectivity. Similarly to the U.S., although for somewhat different reasons, the demand for Moscow to exercise skillful statecraft grows higher, than it was in 2000s, as regional framework becomes much less advantageous.

The Russian interests in the current circumstances could be best served by decrease in the level of polarization in the region. This would enable it to come back to the previous non-confrontational diplomacy. In the best of the worlds, it would aspire for the regional players to come together transcending their personal rivalries, to address the multiple radical extremist groups. However, such kind of 'Grand Coalition' designs would be unachievable other than for a very short amount of time, as it was after 9/11 attacks in 2001. Still, any relax of fixation among the Middle Eastern states on undermining each other would be beneficial for Moscow.

The EU Incomplete Power

The European integration group remains concerned regarding its southern neighbors for several decades already. As early as in the 1970s oil shock caused it to initiate Euro-Arab dialogue⁵³. Later the in 1990s it launched Barcelona process to engage with the countries south of the Mediterranean⁵⁴. In the early 2000s, they were also incorporated in the brand new European Neighborhood Policy⁵⁵. Finally, following the French initiative the EU founded Union for the Mediterranean in 2008⁵⁶.

The sequence of initiatives, despite their changing names, reflected deep concern on behalf the European states and institutions regarding threats for its security emerging from the Middle East. The nature of the challenge evolved significantly through time:

from energy security, to terrorism, and to migration. However, the response toolbox of the EU through time remained rather limited. It, basically, relied on three primary instruments: political engagement, economic benefits and normative attractiveness.

The EU allocates substantial resources in aid the less developed states of the Middle East and provides an important market for local economies. It also emanates an image of prosperity and comfort, which becomes so attractive to the local population in the region. The European states could also mobilize some of the former colonial ties in support of their interests across the region. This is especially true with the former colonial possessions of France in the North Africa.

These instruments guaranteed it place at the table in deliberations on some of the most important issues in the region, such as Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iranian nuclear program. Indeed, since the first half of the 2000s the European Union demonstrated increasing ability to achieve internal coordination for international activities. The Lisbon Treaty of 2007, although far from settling all the issues, provided a robust institutional framework for it, through allocating positions of High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of

⁵³ Miller R. *The Euro-Arab Dialogue and the Limits of European External Intervention in the Middle East, 1974-77* // *Middle Eastern Studies*. 2014. Vol. 50, No. 6. P. 936-959.

⁵⁴ *The Barcelona Process: Building a Euro-Mediterranean Regional Community*. / ed. by Joffe G., Vasconcelos A. N.Y.: Routledge, 2014.

⁵⁵ *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. Wider Europe- Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*. Brussels, 11.3.2003. COM(2003) 104 final. URL: http://eeas.europa.eu/enp/pdf/pdf/com03_104_en.pdf.

⁵⁶ *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean*. Brussels, 20.5.2008 COM(2008) 319 final. URL: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52008DC0319&from=EN>.

the European Commission to a single person and establishing European External Action Service⁵⁷.

The EU foreign policy still suffers from the prolonged lag in consensus building among its members and from time to time reproduces the logic of the lowest common denominator. Nevertheless, in the last decade it has not witnessed extensive internal arguments comparable to the split regarding the Iraq war of 2003. As a result, the EU is better able to provide coherent strategies and synchronize deployment of capabilities by its Member-States. Indeed, it seems that the European governments manage to agree faster and better on engagement with the world, than on the internal issues, such as economic hardships in Southern Europe or BREXIT.

Despite all these improvements, the EU still lacks the most significant ingredient of the essential power mix – ability to extend security guarantees to the regional players. The Libyan war of 2011, in which Britain and France took the lead, confirmed and deepened rather than decreased suspicions regarding potential for military capabilities projection of the European states⁵⁸. In the crucial episodes of the air campaign they proved unable to pursue operations without American support in the most basic matters⁵⁹. The recent reports on their military readiness demonstrate absence of substantial change since⁶⁰.

Meanwhile, the ability to extend security guarantees remains a major currency in the region torn by enmity and mutual mistrust. The European reactions to the crisis with Syrian chemical weapon of 2013 as well as to the advancement of ISIS in

2014 uncover that even Britain and France, although by far the strongest in the EU, are only auxiliary powers to the U.S. military colossus. This, as well as more general patterns of alliance behavior in the Western block, position Brussels as mostly secondary to Washington. Despite some attempts to pursue autonomous policies, its strategy remains in the shadow of the American one.

This dependence is not always a bad thing. Another lesson of the Libyan war is that the European states could rely on substantial contribution from their American ally as long as they manage to persuade it in the coincidence of interests across the Atlantic. However, the deficiencies in military capabilities together with the limitations on strategic independence damage perceptions of the EU as a meaningful actor in regional politics across the Middle East.

Meanwhile, so far, the EU appears to be the party most directly and seriously affected by the Syrian conflict and the rise of ISIS among extraregional powers. While Moscow is concerned with the potential return of radical extremists to North Caucasus or Central Asia, and Washington debates probable involvement of 'Daesh' in San Bernardino shooting⁶¹, European states already experience the flow of refugees and a chain of deadly terrorist attacks. In the meantime, migration challenge is precisely an issue, where it could enjoy very limited support from Washington.

The EU appears especially underprepared and vulnerable to the changes in the neighboring region. Although its security is dependent to a significant degree on the situation in the Middle East, the utility of its traditional instruments of engagement with the region is limited. While the number of refugees arriving to the EU exceeded 1 mln in 2015 alone⁶², its instinctive reaction is to follow established path of purchasing stability for itself rather than engaging with the problem directly.

There are certain long-term solutions under discussion, including reform of the Schengen area and strengthening border control. However,

⁵⁷ *Foreign Policy Aspects of the Lisbon Treaty. Third Report of Session 2007-2008. House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. 16.01.2008. URL: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmffaff/120/120.pdf>.*

⁵⁸ *Wu Xian. An Analysis of the EU's Military Intervention against Libya. Working Paper Series on European Studies. Institute of European Studies. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Vol. 6, No. 4, 2012. URL: http://ies.cass.cn/en/UploadFiles_8765/201211/2012111311034745.pdf.*

⁵⁹ *DeYoung K., Jaffe G. NATO runs short on some munitions in Libya. The Washington Post. 15.04.2011. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/nato-runs-short-on-some-munitions-in-libya/2011/04/15/AF307EID_story.html.*

⁶⁰ *Alliance at Risk. Strengthening European Defense in an Age of Turbulence and Competition. Atlantic Council. February 2016. URL: <http://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/nato-alliance-at-risk/alliance-at-risk.pdf>.*

⁶¹ *Karimi F., Hanna J., Basil Y. San Bernardino shooters 'supporters' of ISIS, terror group says. 06.12.2015. URL: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/05/us/san-bernardino-shooting/>.*

⁶² *Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean. UNHCR. URL: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>.*

they deal with development of the EU domestic institutions. The most noticeable foreign policy response is a deal with Turkey, which will turn into an external shield for the European states for the price of substantial financial aid, establishing a visa-free regime and advancing accession negotiations for Ankara⁶³. Meanwhile, in negotiations on future Syrian national government as well as in military operations against ISIS, the Brussels and other European powers remain marginal player in comparison with both the U.S. and Russia.

This position is both the result of limited toolbox and lack of will, caused by fear of entrapment

in the Middle Eastern problems without solutions. Even in its current economic stance and despite internal divides, the EU is able to provide substantial funds to support stabilization in the region. It, however, requires strong partners to deal with political and security causes of regional instability. Nevertheless, in its dependence on pooling resources with partners to achieve its goals in the Middle East, the EU is not much different from the two powers described above. Due to its clear appreciation of inherent limitations and tradition of reliance on the U.S., it could, arguably, even better prepared for the current circumstances.

Prospects of Cooperation Between the EU, Russia and the U.S. in the Middle East

The previous sections confirm that each of the three actors (the U.S., Russia and the EU) retain deep interest in the Middle East and has its own security valuables there at stake. Nevertheless, none of them is willing or capable to establish regional order on its own. Moreover, in contrast to the last hundred years today even cooperation among all major outside powers cannot impose stability on the Middle East without contribution from the local states.

The current relations between Russia and the West are dominated by overall mistrust and mutual hostility. There deep-grounded tensions on the global stage and in Euro-Atlantic space cannot be easily ignored or set aside. Still, their policies in the Middle East should not necessarily be hijacked by these general patterns. In fact, recent record proves their ability to cooperate despite them. They managed to find commonly acceptable solutions on Syrian chemical weapon in 2013 and on Iranian nuclear program. They also continued cooperation on Afghanistan despite their disputes over Ukraine and repeatedly managed to organize negotiation

platforms for addressing civil war in Syria (although, without conclusive outcome).

Of all possible areas, Middle East is probably one of the most conducive for meaningful dialogue and even cooperation between Washington, Moscow and Brussels for three main reasons. First, much of the threats each of them is concerned with remain similar for all three. Although, specific priorities could differ at any specific moment, are whether they are articulated as terrorism, Jihadism, migration, piracy or even insecurity of energy supply, they all emerge from the same root. It is the lack of stability and weakness of governance on all levels in the region, which produce most of problems for the outside world.

Second, the U.S., Russia and the EU have all substantial capabilities, which could be valuable for regional stabilization. Moreover, they are too much degree complementary to the others. While each of them holds a variety of tools, it is usually ahead in some of the sources of power. Washington still possesses substantial military edge, Moscow enjoys extensive diplomatic flexibility and Brussels is able to put sizeable funds on the table. All three have seen their advantages shrinking in recent years, but they are still considerable and could guarantee them place at the table in most negotiations on regional matters.

⁶³ Pop V., Norman L. *EU, Turkey Agree on Outlines of New, Broader Migrant Deal. The Wall Street Journal. 07.03.2016. URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/eu-leaders-set-to-put-pressure-on-turkey-to-stem-flow-of-migrants-1457345227>.*

Third, although, interests are substantial for each of the three in the Middle East, the region is not as sensitive for them as some other areas. There is no intense emotional affiliation with it and even in geographic terms Russia and EU (not to mention the United States) are close but still separated either by other countries or at least by sea from the Middle East. They do not have a sense of belonging to this region and perceive themselves more as interested outsiders rather than actual participants of its drama.

Under these circumstances, there is more room for bargaining and compromise between the West and Russia in the Middle East, than, for example, in the Post-Soviet space. This is already evident in comparison of the Syrian truce achieved in February 2016⁶⁴ with more contentious and selectively implemented Minsk agreements on Ukraine. This relatively similar level of engagement and detachment from the region is unique for this combination of powers.

These all characteristics do not preclude significant disagreements among Washington, Moscow and European capitals. The competition between them in the Middle East is apparently inevitable. However, without broader agreement regarding rules of the game the Western players and Russia are deeply vulnerable to the potential manipulation by their regional allies and partners, which would try to play them against each other in their own interests.

It should be mentioned that Washington, Moscow and European capitals have solid record of cooperation on the regional agenda with some tangible results. While the Middle East remains probably the only region, which lacks inclusive institutions for regional players, not to say outside powers, the U.S., Russia and the EU already have substantial record of institutionalized cooperation within ad hoc groups, dealing with specific issues. The two most prominent ones are Middle Eastern Quartet and “P5+1” group dealing with Iranian nuclear dossier.

A series of Russian-American meetings which trace its roots to the early discussion in 2012 on Syria and continue with significant breaks till now could

⁶⁴ Wintour P. *US and Russia agree to enforce new Syria ceasefire*. *The Guardian*. 22.02.2016. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/22/us-and-russia-agree-to-enforce-new-syria-ceasefire>.

qualify for another informal platform for coordination. This is especially true, after its agenda shifted from Syria alone to discussion of other regional hotspots, including Libya and Yemen⁶⁵. Due to the possible domestic resentment in Washington, it would be hard to institutionalize these consultations, but there could be public recognition by executive authorities that they would be organized on the regular basis both on technical and high levels.

In broader terms, it would be premature to attempt to construct overall institutions for the Middle East (similar to the OSCE in Europe or East Asian Summit in the Pacific) due to the intensive enmity and strong impact of non-state actors. It is important, however, to create venues for dialogue between competing coalitions in the region. The recent consultations on Syria are helpful, as they brought Saudi Arabia and Iran to the table. It would be naïve to expect that these contacts will solve problems in relations between regional powers by themselves.

Still, they channels of dialogue sponsored by the U.S., Russia and the EU could be helpful to decrease mistrust, increase mutual predictability and therefore diminish security dilemmas for regional states. The one format for achieving this goal could be arranging of an expert security forum, similar to the Munich conference in Euro-Atlantic and Shangri-La in Asia-Pacific. While such kind of venues does not have official status they attract high-level participation and open room for backchannel discussions.

The Manama Dialogue, organized by International Institute for Strategic Studies annually in Bahrain, despite ministerial representation of Arab countries as well as the U.S. and its close allies, does not serve this purpose. The latest session in 2015 hosted participants from neither Iran, nor Turkey⁶⁶. Organization of truly inclusive platform would require finding a venue less associated with any of the major rivaling coalitions in the region.

⁶⁵ *О консультациях спецпредставителя Президента Российской Федерации по Ближнему Востоку и странам Африки, заместителя Министра иностранных дел России М.Л.Богданова со старшим заместителем Госсекретаря США Т.Шэнноном*. Министерство иностранных дел России. 30.03.2016. URL: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2193171.

⁶⁶ *The IISS Manama Dialogue: 11th Regional Security Summit. Official Agenda*. URL: <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama-s-dialogue>.

In the longer term, apart from bringing regional states to the table and create channels for dialogue, it is important also to find cooperative ways to address underline social forces of regional transformation. This would require consultations on defining which ideological orientations are completely unacceptable due to their contribution to radical extremism and eventually terrorism and which, including religiously motivated groups, need to be accommodated or at least accepted in case they are coming to power.

The desire to conserve existing political regimes without any substantive change is as untenable as a hope to promote moderate liberal democracies. It is even more utopian to

attempt engineering and sponsoring political transformations in the local communities from outside. Evolution of national institutions in most of the countries after “Arab Spring” proves that there is significant path-dependency in their development⁶⁷.

Nevertheless, extent of transnational processes as well as the permeability of states in the Middle East infer that their receptive to careful outside incentives. The U.S., Russia and the EU would benefit if there signaling to the local governments and communities would be in the very least bit harmonized. The current Syrian crisis demonstrates detrimental effect on its own security of the absence of such synchronization.

Conclusion

The flow of threats from the Middle East in a last one and a half decade became such a familiar feature of global politics that it sometimes seem as a natural phenomenon. The region is often referred to, therefore, as a core to the arc of instability across Eurasia. Yet, rather than to perceive it as an undividable and unsolvable tangle or to address each specific problem on the ad hoc basis, it is useful to consider the overall framework, explaining relations between regional processes and broader international community.

The current report claims that major outside powers while being far from irrelevant possess less means and limited will to establish and to maintain regional order. Meanwhile, the Middle East politics witnesses growing consolidation based on interstate rivalry in what could be essentially describes as a three-center system. The severity of mutual suspicions and enmity predict deepening tensions rather than stabilization under this arrangement. This is especially likely given fractured social bedrock of regional politics.

The ongoing regional transformations already caused major readjustment of the American, Russian and European strategies. As linear development of the current trends would result in increasing risks

to their national interests and security, cooperation among three of them becomes more conducive to their priorities than before. It could be beneficial due to the complementarity of their capabilities. Their recent record demonstrated that their consolidated position could create substantial improvements from elimination of Syrian chemical weapon, to establishing checks on Iranian nuclear program, to diminishing major extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS.

The current report has not got into details on how the regional players could perceive and respond to any kind of understanding among the powerful outsiders. The previous record shows that it could reinforce their suspicion towards untrusted and sometimes despised Western allies (Russia will usually fall in the same category in this thinking). However, it is feasible to expect that rivalry with each other would prevail over distrust to the global powers and would require them to cooperate. Contrary, to the popular “clash of Civilizations” metaphor the competition within regions is still stronger than among them.

⁶⁷ Сапронова М. Становление новой государственности на Арабском Востоке // *Международные процессы*. 2015. Том 13, №3. С. 26–39. DOI 10.17994/IT.2015.13.2.42.2.



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