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RUSSIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PLAYING ON ALL FIELDS

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THE RULES OF THE GAME

The year 2017 was a turning point in the transformation that began in the Middle East six years ago. Although none of the bloody conflicts is over and some are escalating instead of abating, fears that all states in the region were doomed have proved alarmist. Positive change is gaining momentum, albeit slowly: local players are looking for political solutions to conflicts, and the demand for economic and political reform is growing in the region's weakened and vulnerable countries.

The experience of the Middle East in recent years has highlighted the value of the state as a special form of public association that possesses both administrative and enforcement mechanisms, establishes legal norms, and acts as the main steward of national sovereignty. The state is a value in itself even though some political governments are imperfect. For a weak or failed state can deteriorate into an ungovernable territory where non-state armed actors pursue their own goals, where nobody is responsible for people's security and survival, and where stability and development are impossible in principle.

Therefore, settling conflicts and strengthening states are two interconnected goals and the core of international politics in the Middle East.

For the measures taken by the international community to be at least relatively successful, we need to determine the impact of the conflicts on regional societies and states, and how the conflicts themselves have changed. Whether the prospects for negotiated peace have improved, or if the factions are ready to keep fighting because they believe that military and, hence, political victory is assured.

1. Fear as a driver of reform

Contrary to apocalyptic predictions, none of the states in the throes of conflicts has fallen apart or disappeared from the map. While there are entropic forces at work, events in the region have demonstrated the relative stability of political

governments (Iraq and Syria) and sociopolitical structures (Yemen and Libya). However, fear of possible violence and conflicts has become the main sociopolitical factor in the Middle East, a factor that determines the behavior of both political elites and the general public.

In the 2010s, countries of the region have lost confidence in the permanence of their states, and a possibility of changing borders became a fixture on the agenda of all discussions on the region's future.

The consequences of this have been contradictory.

This uncertainty prevents those involved in the political process in politically unstable countries from acting strategically, feeds the political egoism and opportunism of leaders, and hinders the development of good governance. In other cases, uncertainty becomes a major component of the social contract, under which society accepts certain restrictions, while the government pledges to strengthen national security and the political regime. However, there are cases when uncertainty can become the driver of reforms by forcing the elite to create a more acceptable system of relations between the authorities and society.

The fear factor influences behavior both of states and ethnic groups fighting for statehood, primarily the Kurds and the Palestinians. The Kurds are in the most difficult situation, because local elites perceive their struggle for self-determination as a threat to territorial integrity and view the Kurds as separatists.

The fear of losing control over territories which the Kurds view as their own and which they liberated from the terrorists, is driving them to strengthen ties with various Kurdish organizations in neighboring states, provoking a harsh reaction from these states, such as Turkey's operation in Afrin. Furthermore, even when partial autonomy is achieved, it gives rise to violent disputes between various factions of the Kurdish elite vying for power and resources.

Ultimately, the Kurds' interests and concerns find only partial support among the

countries in the grips of civil war or among foreign actors, who have other priorities, such as defeating terrorists, shoring up states or working on settlement plans.

The Palestinians also fear losing the chance to have a state of their own. However, they are in a better situation even amid the recent negative developments, because of the long history of international obligations regarding their cause. Palestinians have to contend with military, political and economic pressure, but their cause is an issue in the entire Arab world, unlike the problem of the Kurds who have to contend with the general hostility of Arabs.

2. Civil societies grow stronger

The strengthening of civil societies in the region was an unexpected result of the ongoing period of transformation.

In some countries, this happened due to reforms initiated by governments in response to the challenges of the past 10 years. In other countries, civil societies grew stronger because the state grew weaker, and societies had to take the path of sociopolitical self-organization.

For example, the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has increased by nearly 150 percent since 2011 in Morocco, by over 100 percent in Tunisia and by 50 percent in Jordan. The number of NGOs in Algeria has not increased significantly, yet, it has always been considerable. In all of these countries, which have managed to prevent large-scale violence, NGOs are working to involve more and more people in public activities. In this context, it does not matter if these NGOs are financed by the government as is the case in Morocco, or are foreign-funded as in Tunis.

However, civil societies are also growing in the countries in the grip of armed conflicts. Civil society in Syria is growing due to the operation of refugee organizations, the numerous agencies in government-controlled areas, as well as the

operation of local councils in the areas liberated from terrorists. The need for self-organization in Libya is the driving force behind the establishment of local governments based on tribal and territorial systems.

3. Regional actors set the agenda

A relic of the Cold War era, the great power rivalry in the region is becoming increasingly obsolete. Although the trend lines are negative when it comes to the rivalry and mutual mistrust between Russia and the United States, they have to take into account the new conditions created by the strengthening of regional actors.

Global actors have much greater capabilities than regional actors, but are much more reluctant to use them, while regional actors have a better view not just of the situation on the ground, but also of the logic behind the actions of their non-regional partners, which largely offsets their greater capabilities.

Regional actors (both states and non-state actors) are working in their own interests by engaging capabilities of external actors, including the military, and by trying to influence their agenda.

For their part, global powers are willing to help strengthen the most moderate actors, fight terrorism, act as intermediaries and join some initiatives. In a fragmented region, where many multidirectional interests converge and strange alliances are formed, global powers can succeed only if they maintain relations with the broadest possible group of states and non-state participants of the political process.

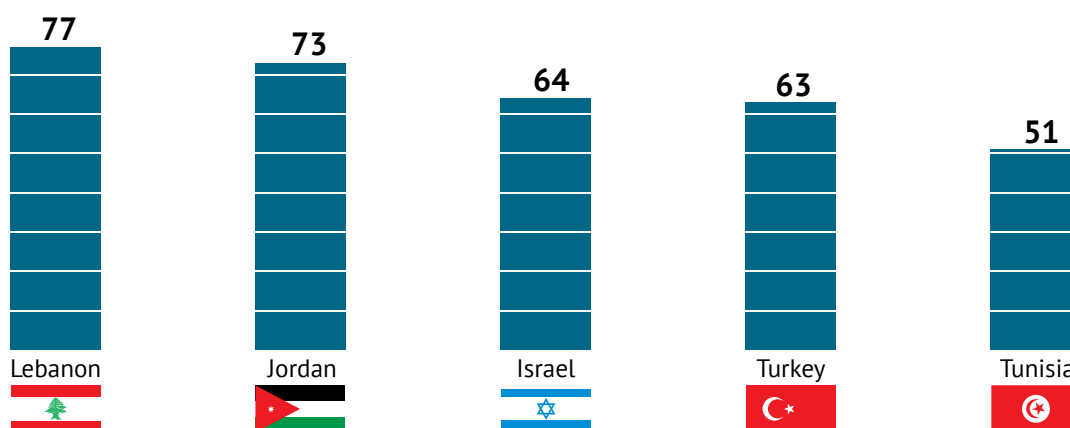
While global and regional actors are trying to shape these conflicts in the pursuit of their own interests, it is the internal dynamics of conflicts themselves that largely determines whether the bloodshed ceases or continues.

The region is transforming amid the changing international order and accelerating sociopolitical processes, and so the behavior of some actors is

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Russia plays a more important role in the Middle East today compared with 10 years ago

(Public opinion pool, %)



Source: Pew Research Center.

influenced more by tactical considerations than a well-conceived strategy. In a number of cases, domestic politics and differences between individual elite groups are becoming the main factors shaping Middle East policy. This results in political excesses and inconsistent behavior on the part of some global and regional actors.

Taken together, the Middle East faces great obstacles to breaking the vicious cycle of conflict. The region's future depends on recovery, stable development, balanced reforms and a reasonable use of resources, as well as on a new paradigm of relations with external forces, which can assist the region's socioeconomic and political development and help it bolster security.

4. The end of counterterrorism as a unifying factor

ISIS has been defeated in Syria and Iraq. It has lost control of vast territories; its military

capacity has been seriously degraded; and lastly, it has sustained heavy losses in manpower and equipment. Coupled with successful offensives against other terrorist groups in Syria, primarily Al-Nusra Front in Idlib, this has taken the struggle against international terrorism to a new plane. The vulnerability of large terrorist groups is making it less likely that new well-organized terrorist organizations will emerge and hold territory of their own, to which terrorists would flock from all over the world.

At the same time, the main factors leading to the rise of terrorist organizations have not been rooted out, specifically in Iraq. The logical consequence is the growing threat of terrorist networks, the creation of sleeper cells in the region and beyond it, intensifying recruitment activities, the proliferation of terrorism in cyberspace, as well as the increasing use of new instruments, such as cryptocurrencies, for terrorist purposes.

For the past few years, the international community has viewed ISIS as the incarnation of

FIGHTING ISIS* ACROSS THE GLOBE

ISIS continued to exert an influence outside Syria and Iraq, through direct attacks organised by the group or its affiliates in other regions. Over 40,000 foreigners who flocked to join IS from more than 110 countries both before and after the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014

*ISIS (banned in Russia)

1 Wilayat Sinai

Egypt

- Formed on November 13, 2014

2 Afghanistan

- Formed in January 2015

3 Libya

- Recruits from Tunisia, Kenya, Nigeria, Mali, Senegal

4 East Asia Wilayat

Philippines, Indonesia

- Recruits from Arabian Peninsula as well as from elsewhere in South and South East Asia

5 Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

- Declared its support for IS in 2014
- IS-Khorasan will gain additional foreign members as it offers fighters from Central Asia and Western China a more attractive and convenient option

6 Turkistan Islamic Party

Founded by Uyghur jihadists in western China

- Promoting IS interests in Central Asia and China

7 Boko Haram

Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad

- Declared its support for IS in 2014

July 2017



30% of the 5,000 residents of the EU thought to have gone to Syria and Iraq had returned home



10% of the 9,000 foreign fighters from Russia and former republics of the Soviet Union had returned

8 Greater Sahara (ISGS)

Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali

- Formed in 2013

9 Abnaa ul-Calipha

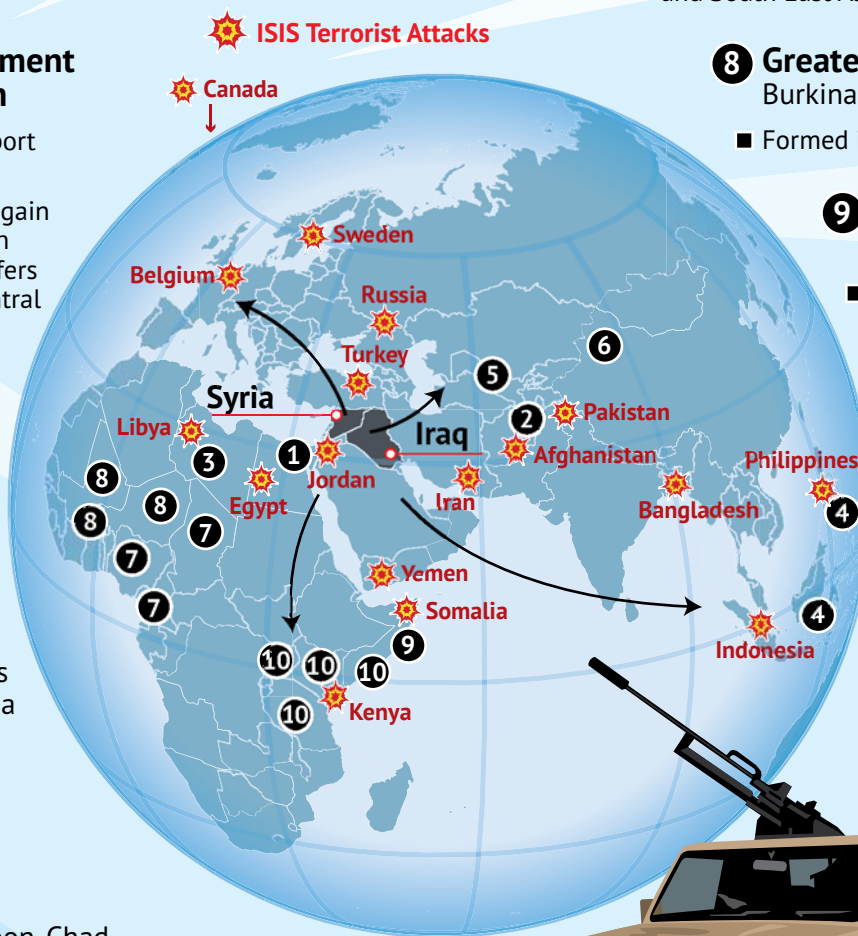
Somalia

- Emerged in 2015 when it broke away from al-Shabaab

10 ISISSKTU

Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda

- A splinter group of al-Shabaab



Sources: <http://thesoufancenter.org> <http://ctc.usma.edu/> <https://thediplomat.com/>

international terrorism, and the struggle against it as a major factor in cooperation between regional actors and also, to an even higher degree, between global actors. This is why, after ISIS was defeated, the fundamental task of combatting terrorism started morphing into a formal driver of international coordination efforts. According to the US National Defense Strategy, the fight against terrorism has ceded priority to strategic rivalry among the leading world powers.

5. Increasing fragility of alliances

Alliances of convenience are falling apart as the allies' own interests start to take precedence over common goals. While maintaining interaction on a number of issues of mutual concern, allies are increasingly ready to act alone. They pay lip service to coordination with partners who do not share their concerns, or at least some of them.

Relations between Turkey and the Kurds from the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria have deteriorated to the point of direct military confrontation, contrary to the policies of Russia or the United States. At the same time, antagonism between Turkey and Bashar al-Assad's government has increased.

Despite good relations with Russia, Israel has increased shelling of Hezbollah units and Syrian government forces.

Tensions are growing between Gulf monarchies and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other, in Iraq and Syria, and the US initiative on Jerusalem has added fuel to the smoldering disputes between Israel and Arab countries.

Differences are growing between Saudi Arabia and UAE over Yemen. Although they are members of the same coalition, they do not agree on the country's future and even support different parties to the Yemeni conflict. And lastly, the assassination of Yemen's ousted leader Ali Abdullah Saleh is evidence of the split in the Houthi-Saleh alliance, which the Saudi-led coalition has to deal with.

6. Political settlement in Syria as an immediate priority

Victory in the common struggle against ISIS has enhanced fundamental differences between the two coalitions in Syria. As Damascus gained control over more territory, dividing lines over the country's future grew starker. The US-led coalition, acting in accordance with its declared goals, has increased support to the opposition, which includes quite a few radicals who are ready to use terrorist and subversive methods against the Syrian government. In addition, Washington said its troops would not leave Syria regardless of the speed or results of the political settlement.

The closer relationship between the United States and Kurdish forces, and the US intention to deploy a special military contingent in Kurdish-controlled territories, may ultimately strengthen the nascent elements of the Kurdish state, which will hinder the restoration of Syria's territorial integrity, which is stipulated in UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

At the same time, international mediators are trying to shift the focus from military confrontation in Syria to a political settlement. Formation of de-escalation zones, in addition to organization of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi have demonstrated the creativity of Moscow and its partners to shape unique mechanisms of peacebuilding and political settlement. However, further Syrian crisis resolution has to take develop within the Geneva process, and Syrians are the only ones to define its future.

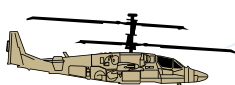
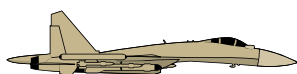
A potential change in the balance of forces could be a disincentive to opposition groups to negotiate in the absence of strong bargaining positions. At the same time, part of the government elite may have greater hopes for military victory than the dividends that negotiations would eventually pay.

The continued Russian military presence in Syria, Moscow's broad network of ties with

THE END OF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY OPERATION IN SYRIA*

Russia began to withdraw its military forces from Syria

First of all will be returned to Russia



25 aircraft and helicopters



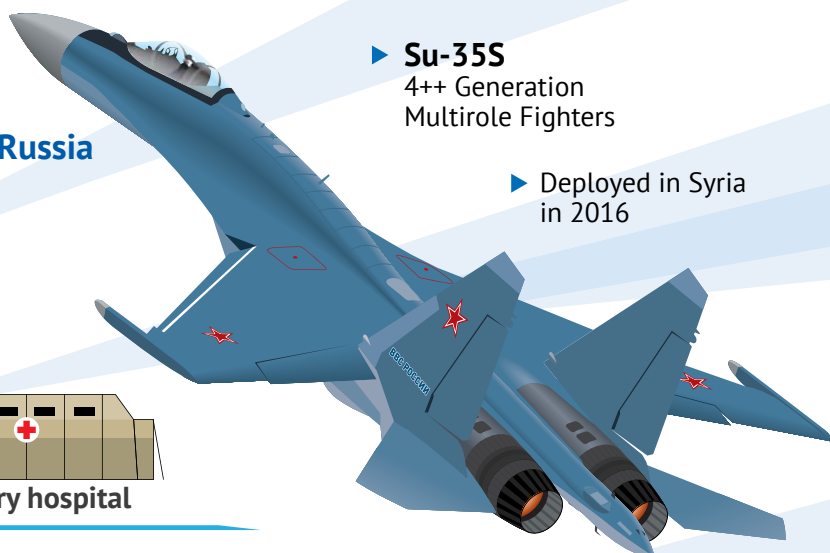
Special forces unit and military police



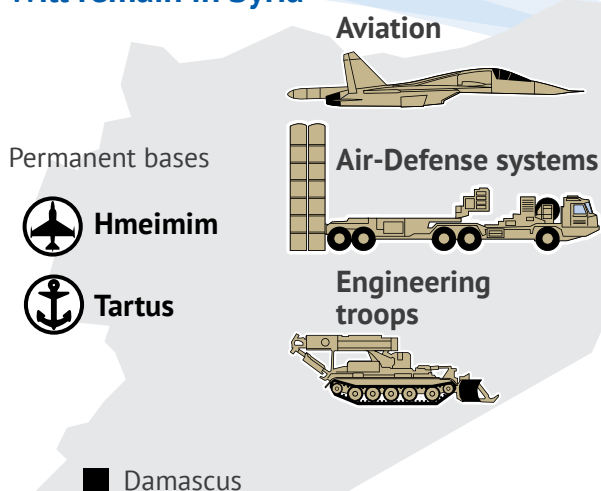
Military hospital

► **Su-35S**
4++ Generation
Multirole Fighters

► Deployed in Syria in 2016



Will remain in Syria



Number of flights

Aircraft

Helicopters

6,956

>7,000

Russian servicemen together with the Syrian army destroyed



32,000 militants



394 tanks



12,000 military equipment

During the operation in Syria the Russian servicemen provided medical assistance to 57,000 citizens of this country

Liberated



>67,000
square kilometers
of the territory of Syria



>1,000
cities and towns



78
oil and gas fields



2
deposits of phosphate ore

The Russian military operation in Syria began on September 30, 2015

*Data as of December 2017

Sources: News agencies

the Syrian government and various opposition groups, as well as Russia's energetic efforts to move the settlement process forward suggest that Russia plans to support Syria's post-conflict development.

7. Weak actors impede peace in Libya

Opportunities for political compromise, albeit limited, have appeared in Libya. Russia's policy of maintaining equidistance from the various sides of the Libyan conflict was manifest in the numerous visits to Russia by representatives of Tripoli, Tobruk, Misurata and other political centers. Moscow has declared its support for the UN settlement plan, but Russia's strategy and interests in that country still puzzle foreign observers, and the prospects of international cooperation on settlement in Libya remain vague.

The extremely low institutionalization of the political process in Libya, lack of experience establishing political organizations, and hyper-militarized society impede the emergence of stable political actors. At the same time, accelerated urbanization during the rule of Muammar Qaddafi led to the partial degeneration of the tribal structure, which is also unable to serve as the backbone of a new social order. As distinct from Syria, where the sides are searching for an acceptable compromise, Libya's challenge is to form stable political organizations. In all probability, this task may be resolved in three stages. The first involves appealing to the basic socio-political structures that are still functioning – local councils and municipalities in cities, tribal councils and the like. Second, durable agreements between armed factions must be reached, which could lead the way to the third stage of shaping political coalitions. The first and second stages are the most complicated, and external mediators can only play a limited role here.

8. Disintegration continues in Yemen

There has been no progress toward resolving the conflict in Yemen, and the trend lines are negative. Out of all armed conflicts in the Middle East, the Yemeni conflict has led to the most severe humanitarian consequences. Despite the tragedy of the situation and the conflict's emergence as the key problem of the Arabian Peninsula, it does not get the attention it deserves from outside players. The dynamics of the conflict include continued fragmentation of the country's political space and simultaneous increase in clashes of regional players on its territory. Apart from being a proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Yemen has now become a stage for the larger confrontation among the Gulf monarchies: Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The intolerable humanitarian situation in the country's northern areas has only hardened the positions of the Houthis, the allied General People's Congress and the majority of sheikhs of the Hashid and Bakil tribes. They described Ali Abdullah Saleh's pivot to cooperation with the Saudi coalition in December 2017 as an attempt to stage a coup in the enemy's favor and the assassination of the former president prefigured a new round of violence.

Territorial fragmentation is growing in the Yemeni south. In May 2017, the main city of the southern regions, Aden, and Hadhramaut, the province with the largest reserves of hydrocarbons in the east, announced the formation of their own local governments seeking de facto independence from the administration of interim Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. External support for the armed factions pursuing independence is also contributing to territorial disintegration.

9. The Palestinian problem is back on the agenda

The Palestinian-Israeli peace process is moving in the wrong direction. The unilateral US

recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was announced in blatant disregard of international obligations regarding Palestine, and has met predictable resistance from Palestinians, and increased the tensions in Arab-Israeli and Arab-US relations in general. Both sides' positions have become more extreme. The Palestinians are ready to tear up previous agreements with Israel, while the Israeli right wing is creating insurmountable obstacles to Israel's eventual withdrawal from the occupied West Bank territories. The prospects of a two-state solution continue to recede into the distance.

Taken together, this calls for greater international efforts to jumpstart Israeli-Palestinian talks. However, it should be noted that the framework for these talks has been undermined by Mahmoud Abbas' recent statement that 'the Oslo Accords are dead'. The US decision on Jerusalem flies in the face of political realism and is seen as an expression of support for one side of the conflict. It has put in question the future of the Middle East Quartet. Meanwhile, Moscow has a proven track record of maintaining trust-based relations with the Israeli and Palestinian leadership alike. Evidence of this is Russian-Israeli cooperation in Syria and the second is intra-Palestinian meeting held in Moscow in January 2017.

* * *

Russia has managed to keep open the window of opportunity in the Middle Eastern medley of parallel and conflicting interests, faint hopes and mistrust, rational moves and irrational

views. Russia has succeeded largely because it maintains working relations with widely divergent international parties, such as Israel and Hezbollah; Iran and Saudi Arabia; the Tripoli government, the House of Representatives in Tobruk, and the tribes in southern Libya; as well as Qatar and Abu Dhabi.

Moscow's trust-based relations with the Palestinian leadership create conditions for increasing Russian involvement in the Middle East settlement process, while parallel movement on the Russian-Iranian and Russian-Saudi tracks could help settle differences between Tehran and Riyadh.

This inclusive approach based on strengthening ties with influential regional actors does not rule out maintaining relations with global partners. However, the regional dimension of Russia's policy is more important for dealing with the complex problems of the Middle East. Developments in the region can change overnight, which means that Moscow must act flexibly with regard to the parties' numerous concerns.

In this situation, Russia's military presence in the region is an important, but not the only instrument of the Kremlin's multipronged policy. The military component of Russian policy sometimes causes regional and some global actors to suspect Russia of seeking to supplant other world powers in the Middle East. This opinion is divorced from reality. Russia has indeed demonstrated its effectiveness in the fight against terrorism and its importance as a political partner. It is becoming increasingly obvious in Moscow that stabilization, reconstruction and conflict resolution in the Middle East cannot be achieved by any country alone. Middle East diplomacy is a team sport.



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