



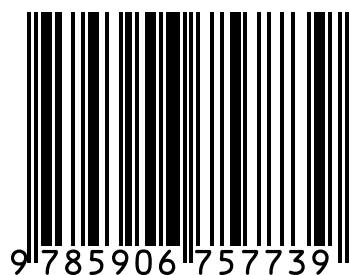
Russia in the Middle East: The Harmony of Polyphony

Vasily Kuznetsov, Vitaly Naumkin,
Irina Zvyagelskaya

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The Middle East is increasingly important in the fabric of international relations. Developments there have greater consequences for the rest of the world than in the Cold War era. This is not primarily due to the destabilizing impulses that keep the region on centre stage in world politics, for the Middle East has long known turbulence and conflict and the security challenges it posed in the past were hardly less significant than today, especially given the emergence of nuclear weapons in the region. Its current critical role is the product of a larger process: the formation of a new world order, a difficult and painful period of overcoming asymmetry that is challenging and destabilizing the balance of power in the world. The narrative that stability could be maintained in a world governed exclusively by the United States was a rather dubious one from the outset, and it was not long before it crashed and burned in collisions with political realities: the absence of a counterweight only indulges the temptation to use force unrestrainedly and to project one's ideological and political preferences onto countries and regions to which the model is alien.

The Middle East is increasingly influenced by the rivalry between leading global players, which also manifests itself in local conflicts, complicating stabilization efforts even when there are internationally approved plans for resolution. The conflict in Syria and the Palestinian problem are especially illustrative.

The internal tumultuousness of the region, the persistent undermining or outright destruction of statehood, and inadequate responses by elites to contemporary challenges have opened up new opportunities for those Middle Eastern countries not yet hit by the wave of revolutions: those left standing have resolved to strengthen their security at the expense of their weakened and increasingly dependent neighbours.

The gravitational force of conflicts has affected not only regional states that from the very beginning tried to find allies, but also global powers that were directly involved in regional affairs through their military presence, participation in military actions, or attempts to exert diplomatic influence on conflicting parties.

Formally, the use of military power (in Iraq and Syria) by extra-regional forces can be explained by the need to defeat international terrorism. It posed a mortal threat not only to the weakened stateness of the conflict-affected countries but the entire regional order, since

it erased borders, destroyed institutions, made an ideological substitution and proposed an archaic system of stateness and social and family relations as a recipe for justice, and the massacre of those who opposed it as a method.

More generally, the declared fight against international terrorism has always allowed for broad assumptions and interpretations. Although, as is generally recognized, terrorism is a method used by various ideological and political forces (the right, the left, ethno-confessional, religious, etc.), the attitude towards organizations that used it has always been different because they were or could be situational partners, temporary allies or useful players in the strategy of one or another power. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Al Qaeda were from the very beginning extra-regional phenomena challenging existing borders and states, systems of governance and ethical standards, and thereby becoming a global threat whose destructive effect was acknowledged by everyone, including countries that had initially provided assistance to this jihadist Frankenstein.

However, the idea of rallying under the slogan of combating international terrorism could not last long. Approaches to regional organizations using terrorist methods were different and were dictated by opportunistic considerations related to supporting key players in conflicts. This was most clearly manifested in the context of the Syrian confrontation, when the military defeat of ISIL created a difficult choice for two coalitions, Western and Russian. One option was to continue limited interaction on the ground and in the diplomatic field, while the other was to exacerbate their rivalry amid deep differences on a future political order, the territorial integrity of Syria, and the role of regional forces and non-state actors, with all the ensuing military and non-military risks.

The Middle East has repeatedly showed how political irresponsibility, coupled with military recklessness, can create chaos, which, contrary to a popular theory, cannot be controlled. The current situation is different in that the context of conflicts required military presence of both Russia and the US. It can be described as mutual containment, but in the present tense situation it does not rule out incidents, provocations or the use of force by a party that is not ready to weigh all consequences of such a step.

Rhythms of the Middle East

Despite the dramatism of the situation in some Middle East countries in the 2010s and unexpected moves made by individual players in 2017, the political, social and economic development of the region fits into the paradigm that was formed in previous years. Regional processes have become more predictable, and analysts and political actors are inclined to believe that the peak of the transformation is over and that the current trends in political, social, and economic development will determine the regional picture for the years, if not decades, to come.

At the same time, changes in the existing paradigm cannot be ruled out, for example, if global differences and conflicts, stemming above all from the ever-worsening relations between Russia and some Western countries, are projected to the Middle East. However, there may also be internal causes for change. If countries that successfully coped with challenges of the early 2010s (Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt) do not prove again their resilience to internal challenges and threats, there may come another wave of transformation, which may be different from the first one and, possibly, harsher.

The growing reforms in Saudi Arabia, the economic challenges facing Egypt and exacerbated by the problem of water resources, the political transit in Algeria, and knots of social tensions in Morocco – all these inevitable circumstances, brought about by unique conditions in each specific country, in the short term increase political risks.

For the time being, however, high proneness to conflict is the most important factor in the region's self-perception and its perception by the international community. Despite the positive experience of the de-escalation zones in Syria, and numerous attempts to revive the Skhirat Agreement on Libya and various initiatives on Yemen, there has been no major progress in the political settlement of all the three conflicts over the past year. Moreover, there are signs that parties to conflicts, external actors, and societies themselves are adapting to the conflict situation. This routinization reduces chances for settlement.

This situation causes external actors to pay increasing attention to the need for economic reconstruction of the three countries. We are witnessing an implicit departure from the initial international consensus that a peace settlement should be a condition for implementing reconstruction programmes. In areas where the level of violence has been reduced, infrastructure has begun to be restored ad hoc through various channels – from top to bottom, through government support, and from the bottom up, through interaction with local councils, municipalities, tribal groups, and various non-state actors.

In Syria and Yemen, where the humanitarian situation is particularly difficult, parties to the conflict and some external forces tend to use economic assistance programmes as tools for fighting.

The consolidation of civil society in the region is becoming an important factor in strengthening stateness from the bottom up. In Libya, it is due to the weakening of government institutions and the need for social and political self-organization of society. In Syria, it is due to organizations working with refugees, local councils operating in liberated territories, and organizations and agencies operating in territories controlled by Damascus.

Simultaneously, the growth of civil society in relatively prosperous countries is a result of reforms launched by governments to meet the challenges of the decade. In Morocco, for example, the number of non-governmental organizations has increased by almost 150 per cent since 2011, in Tunisia by more than 100 per cent, and in Jordan by 50 per cent. In Algeria, the growth has not been that spectacular, but the number of NGOs in the country was already great before. In all these countries, which have avoided mass violence, newly established NGOs make it possible to involve more and more people in civil activities. In this regard, it is not so important whether they enjoy government support, as in Morocco or Algeria, or whether they receive external funding, as in Tunisia.

Such changes are certainly positive, but they may also pose threats. In Tunisia and Lebanon, civil society institutions demonstrate greater stability and adaptability to challenges than government institutions. This factor discredits the latter in the eyes of society, which has no experience of democratic development, and impedes the establishment of effective governance.

The external funding of NGOs may result in their host countries importing agendas that are relevant for donor countries, with ambiguous consequences. The result may be the modernization of social relations, but conservative parts of society may view it as a way to impose an alien value system on them. This may serve as a new source of conflict, aggravating still further the position of discriminated groups.

Finally, in Syria, where, notwithstanding the armed conflict, the government has not only preserved all the main institutions of executive power but continues to extend its control to ever new territories, a clash between it and governance institutions that have been established from the bottom is virtually inevitable.

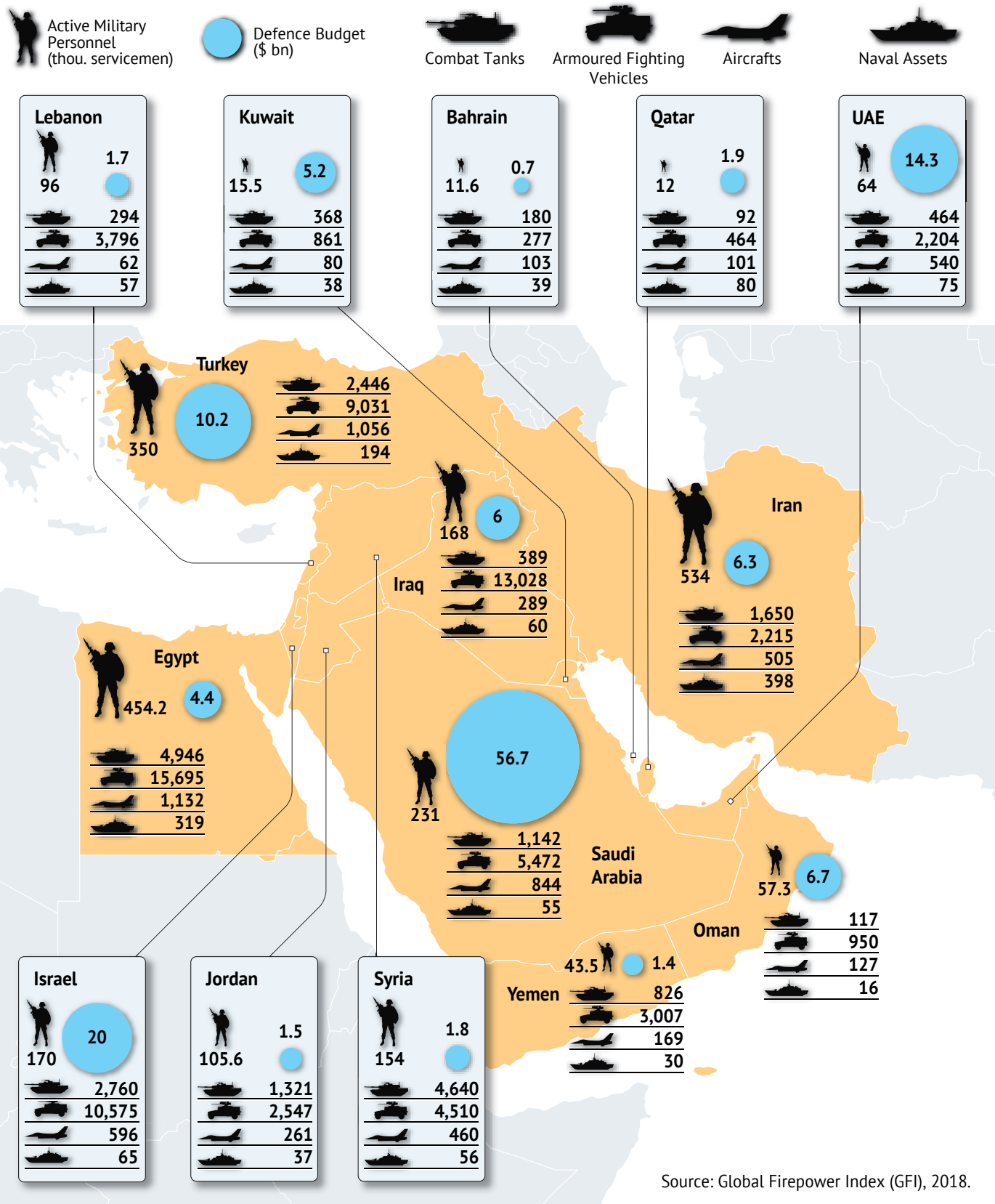
The importance of democratic procedures has increased in all Middle East countries, including those torn by conflicts, which is a notable trend in the development of regional stateness. As before, these procedures are often reduced to the election of heads of state and legislative assemblies and do not always perform a democratic function. In some cases, they play the role of an instrument for legalizing and (not always) legitimizing the incumbent government, while in other cases they are another means of choosing leadership, which is *a priori* secondary to military and economic means.

The issue of elections took centre stage in the Syrian and Libyan peace processes, but in both cases proposals to include elections in the settlement agenda receive serious criticism, albeit for different reasons.

In Syria, the problem is that the election basket is only the third of the four baskets proposed at the Geneva negotiations, and a decision on it should, theoretically, follow decisions on transitional bodies of power and the constitution. Meanwhile, without achieving a preliminary and stable consensus among the main parties to the conflict, the results of any elections will highly likely not be recognized by one of them, which will give a new impetus to the confrontation.

In Libya, after the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, elections have been held twice. In 2014, the House of Representatives was elected, with only 16 per cent of all voting stations functioning. Obviously, a repetition of this

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES



Source: Global Firepower Index (GFI), 2018.

experience can discredit democratic procedures as such and pave the way to more violence or authoritarianism.

Election campaigns in Iraq and Egypt, where the state wages a real war on terrorism in Sinai, are accompanied by constant political violence. In Iraq, where there is an extensive presence of external players and where the government is relatively weak, elections have become a new field of confrontation between actors, whose political ambitions are backed by military force. In Egypt, the terrorist threat has allowed the incumbent president to consolidate the electorate and minimize the competitiveness of elections. At the same time, it has helped prevent destabilization amid high social tensions caused by serious problems in the economy. Despite some positive developments, their solution will require some more time, during which the government will have to take unpopular measures.

The ongoing economic crisis is a major factor in political processes in Tunisia as well, where, unlike Egypt, the executive branch still feels insecure. The municipal elections in this country in 2018 were an important step in the development of democratic procedures, but post-electoral period can aggravate the political situation. The victory of the Ennahdha Party, which went into opposition in 2014, may resume rivalry between Islamists and the 'old' elite. The pressure on Islamists aimed to oust them from country's political space is still a likely scenario. Moreover, the significant number of votes gained by independent candidates confirmed low popular confidence in political parties as such, which may result in a dysfunction of the municipal system.

Generally speaking, the extension of democratic procedures should be viewed as a sign of the ongoing and increasingly complex hybridization of political systems. On the one hand, the manipulation of outward elements of democracy without changing the essential foundations of power will complicate a further institutional development. On the other hand, the hybridization expands the window of opportunity for weak actors, as it not only increases the legitimacy of the incumbent government but also mitigates the rigid centralism inherent in such systems.

The strengthening of civil society in the region and the extension of democratic procedures is a complex and controversial process. Nevertheless, it reflects the ongoing political modernization, which has not been smooth. All

countries are also witnessing a tendency towards archaization. Modernity and archaism are often combined in the activities of social and political communities. For example, armed conflicts have led to the restoration of half-ruined tribal organizations in all countries torn by civil wars. Tribes can not only integrate into modern political systems through NGOs and political organizations but also use them to strengthen their identity, consolidate social groups, and build administrative institutions.

A complex combination of modernity and archaism is also characteristic of non-state armed actors, which have retained their role in the region. They make extensive use of archaic identities and ideologies in their activities and can be equally viewed as a product of weak stateness or as an obstacle to modern state building. Their position in relation to the government is not important and may range from a desire for integration to consistent opposition. In any case, they always represent the interests of people who, for one reason or another, think their rights can be infringed upon without armed support. Often, such forces have external support. However, they not only always have agendas of their own, which are different from their patrons' agendas, but also ask for the latter's support primarily because the central government is not ready to broaden the political field to include them.

External support for these movements is not only instrumental, but is largely due to the commonness of religious-political or only political identities. For Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Egypt denying their support for loyal organizations would be dangerous as it would mean the collapse of the entire value basis of their foreign policies and could ultimately result in a loss of other allies and a serious decline in the legitimacy of their governments in the eyes of citizens.

International terrorist groups occupy a special place among non-state armed actors. The defeat of the Islamic State as a territorial entity in Syria and Iraq has shown limited prospects for such quasi-states and the general vulnerability of large jihadist organizations. This factor reduces the likelihood of the emergence of ISIL analogues, which could attract jihadists from around the world.

At the same time, the root causes of the emergence of such entities have not been eliminated, which increases the threat of networked terrorism and leads to the formation of dormant cells in the region and beyond, the growth

of recruitment activity, a further spread of terrorist activity in cyberspace, and an extensive use of new instruments (for example, cryptocurrencies) by terrorists.

The problem of non-state armed actors in the Middle East is related to the role of armed forces and public security institutions in political systems of the region. Further development of stateness requires government monopoly on legitimate violence and simultaneous depoliticization of its agents. Not a single Arab state has ever fulfilled either task. Many countries in the region view the persisting terrorist threat as a sufficient ground for high political involvement of the armed forces, which can objectively strengthen authoritarianism and, at the same time, weaken stateness.

In Syria and Yemen, the issue of institutions of legitimate violence is partly reduced to the issue of demilitarizing society within the framework of the peace process and reintegrating parties to the armed confrontation. In Libya, the primary task is the unification of the armed forces, their (at least limited) depoliticization, and the adoption of republican identity by them.

And yet, despite apocalyptic forecasts, none of the states involved in the conflict has ceased to exist or broken up. Despite the tendency towards disintegration, they have shown relative stability of their political regimes (Iraq, Syria) and social and political organizations (Yemen, Libya). At the same time, the fear of possible violence and conflicts has become the main factor of social and political life in the Middle East, which determines the behaviour of political elites and broad social strata.

In the 2010s, the region has lost confidence in the longevity of existing state entities, and possible changes in state borders are invariably mentioned whenever the region's future is discussed. This may have mixed consequences. In countries with unstable political systems, such uncertainty does not allow participants in the political process to build long-term development strategies. It conduces to political egoism and opportunistic behaviour on the part of leaders and impedes the development of effective governance. In other cases, it becomes an important element of a social contract in which society agrees to certain restrictions in exchange for the government's harsh measures to strengthen national security and the political regime. Sometimes, however, this uncertainty acts as a catalyst

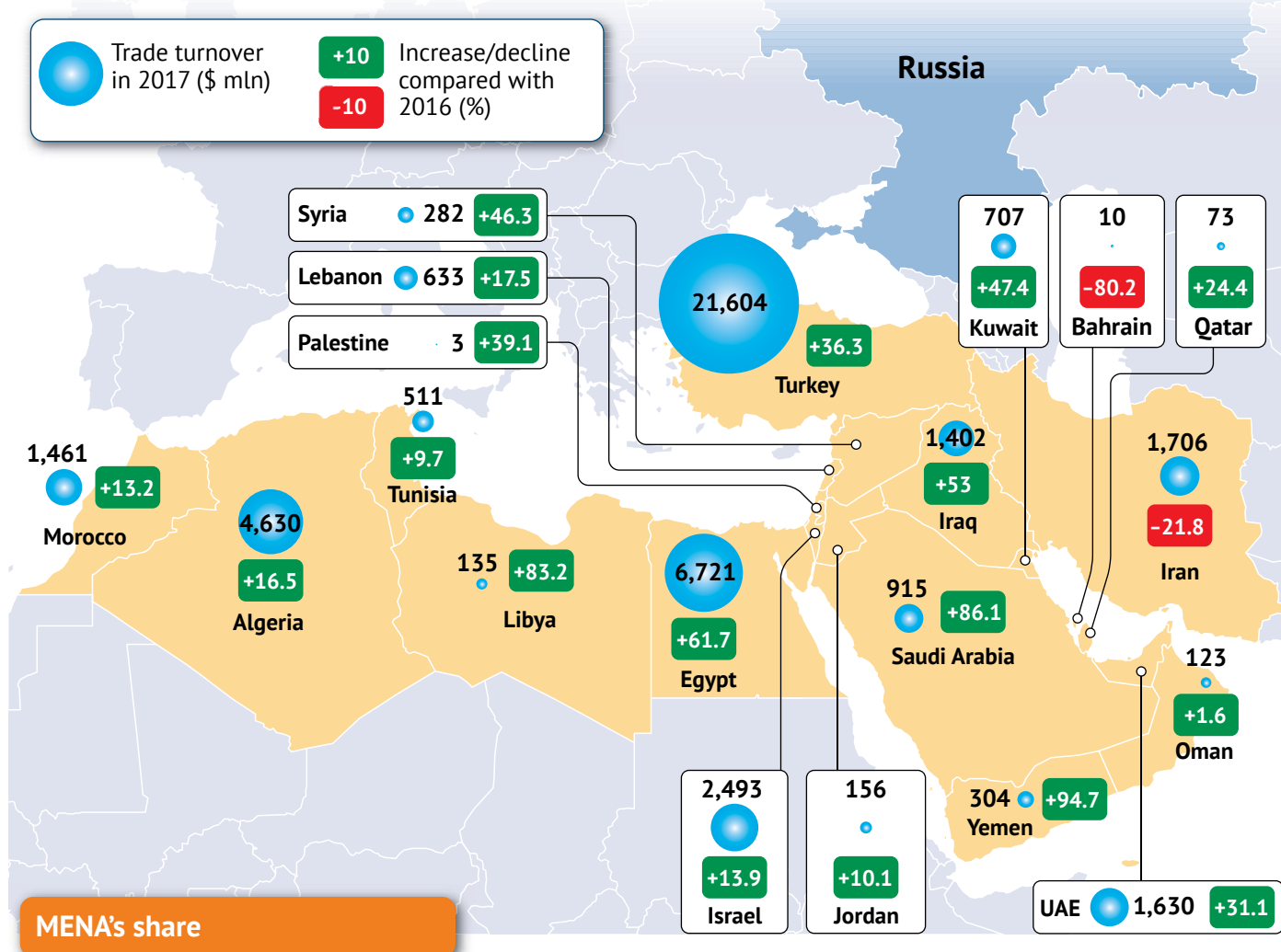
for reforms, causing elites to build a more adequate system of relations between the government and society, which results in the development of civil society and democratic institutions.

For Syria and a large part of the Middle East region, one of the main problems is the Kurdish problem. Undoubtedly, it has regional roots, but due to historical circumstances it has acquired international importance as a precedent. In Kurdish-populated and other countries, much depends on whether or not a balanced approach is found to aspirations of the Kurdish people and what this approach will be. Although each Kurdish-populated country – Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria – views the Kurdish problem as part of their own agenda and their own political context, the international community views it as one problem. In this regard, some experts, including participants of the Valdai Discussion Club Middle East Conference, propose establishing a framework with a UN mandate that would be capable of solving this problem in a comprehensive way.

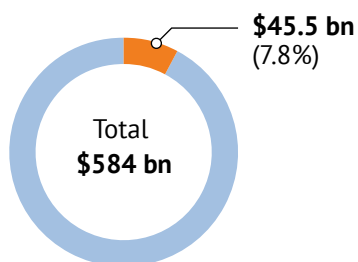
So far, elites of Kurdish-populated countries have viewed their struggle for self-determination as a challenge to territorial integrity of these countries, and Kurdish leaders as separatists. Realizing that the crisis gives them a historical opportunity, if not to gain statehood, then raise their international position, Kurds seek to grasp it, trying the limits of the possible.

Some global actors actively use Kurds for their own geopolitical ends, manipulating Kurds' desire for self-determination (the United States in Syria). Others, namely regional players, use force to prevent Kurds from consolidating themselves in liberated territories and gaining full control over them (Turkey's operation in Afrin, Syria), despite Kurds' achievements in fighting ISIL. At the same time, the achievement of even partial autonomy in some region provokes bitter confrontation between various groups of Kurdish elites struggling for power and resources. A recent independence referendum for Iraqi Kurdistan is an illustrative example of that. Although it has not resulted in real independence, it has highlighted a tendency to instrumentalize the independence issue both in the struggle between Kurdish elites of Iraq and in the whole of the Iraqi political space. The referendum has also demonstrated the international community's desire to support the territorial integrity of existing states as best it can, although the public at large and political elites largely sympathize with Kurdish national movements and recognize the validity of their national aspirations.

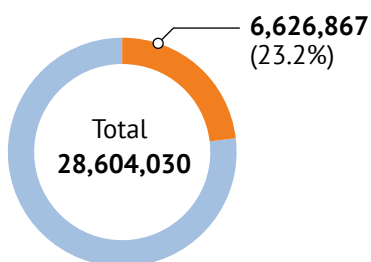
RUSSIA'S TRADE WITH THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES IN 2017



in Russia's trade turnover

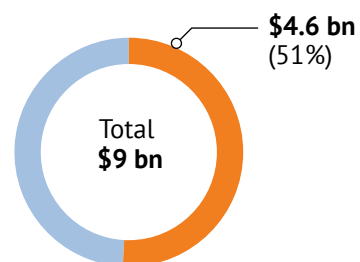


in Russians' total trips outside post-Soviet space



Estimate by Association of Tour Operators based on data from Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation

in Russia's exports of vegetable products



Including grains

Source: en.russian-trade.com, en.ru-stat.com based on data from Federal Customs Service of the Russian Federation

A Middle East Concert for Russia and the World

Despite risks, Russia's policy in the region, with emphasis on the value of sovereignty, the preservation of statehood, and compliance with international norms, was intended to stop the growth of turbulence and unpredictability. In other words, in the contemporary world, the Middle East has not only become an arena of interaction and rivalry between Russia and the West (the same happened in the era of the bipolar world, too), but it has also provided an opportunity to work out new mechanisms and develop new approaches to conflict resolution and the rehabilitation of societies. Their implementation is not mandatory and can be rejected by participants in international relations who disagree with the idea of indivisibility of security and who do not think that many Middle East countries are doomed to authoritarian rule for many years to come.

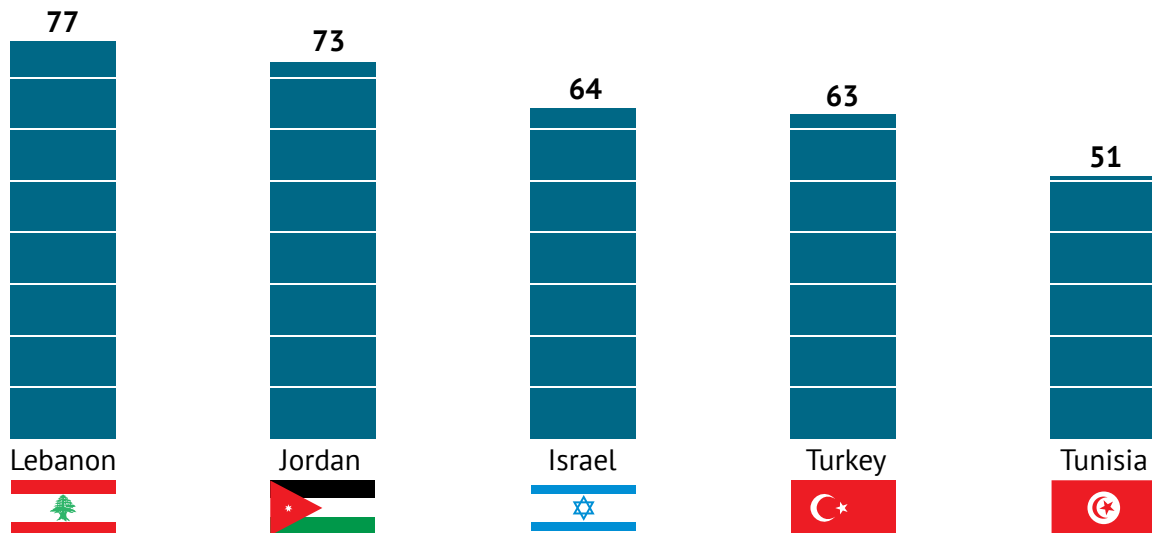
Russia's actions in Syria have marked a new stage in Russian politics. This is not just another example of using force near its borders to pursue its immediate interests, but a demonstration of much broader capabilities and a bid for a global role. The military presence in the region has become an important, but not the only, lever of influence, which has allowed Moscow to pursue a multi-vector policy. The military component of Russia's policy at times causes regional and some global forces to view it as a player bidding to replace other influential powers in the Middle East. This view does not reflect the reality. Of course, Russia has demonstrated effectiveness in fighting terrorism and its importance as a political partner. But to Moscow it is increasingly obvious that efforts to stabilize the situation, recover the economy, and settle Middle East conflicts cannot and should not be unilateral.

It is important that the new role of the Russian Federation is perceived with understanding by many countries and even non-state players in the region, who are genetically accustomed to the existence of an external system of checks and balances and who used to feel uncomfortable in its absence. Russia keeps a window of opportunity open by establishing relations with various players who are far from neutral towards each other. Moscow maintains working relations with Israel and Hezbollah, with Iran and Saudi Arabia, with

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.

the government and the opposition in Syria, with the government in Tripoli, the House of Representatives in Tobruk and tribes in the south of Libya, with Qatar and the UAE, and with Turkey and Kurds.

Russia has reaped big dividends from agreements on arms supplies to various countries, including those that never bought Russian arms before. Whereas military-technical ties with Egypt, Syria, and Algeria are traditional, the breakthrough of Russian companies to the Gulf countries, Turkey, Tunisia, and Morocco is a completely new phenomenon. Orders from Arab countries make up about 20 per cent of all Russian arms sales. In 2016, Russia sold \$300 million worth of weapons to Iraq, almost \$400 million to Iran, and \$1.5 billion to Algeria. Russia's portfolio of defence orders from Middle East countries in 2017 amounted to \$8 billion.¹

¹ See: Akulov, A, 2017, 'Russia's Arms Sales to Middle East Countries Spike to Record-High Levels', *Strategic Culture Foundation*, November 18. Available from: <https://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2017/11/18/russia-arms-sales-middle-east-countries-spike-record-high-levels.html>

On the one hand, selling arms is like exporting security – no one feels safe in a situation of conflict and turbulence, and the demand for weapon systems that have proven their effectiveness will only grow. On the other hand, such situational demand is not enough to convert the military component into political positions and influence. Obviously, limited economic capabilities of Russia do not allow it to play a leading role in the recovery of countries devastated by military conflicts and revolts and in the rehabilitation of societies. Russia's current presence and activity in the Middle East can be viewed as a bid for the status of a leading player, but it will be constantly put to the test. Hence, the activity of some Russian companies that are not directly related to the military-industrial complex, e.g. Rosatom and construction and oil companies, which are trying to enter Middle East markets.

The consolidation of ties with various influential regional players does not rule out maintaining relations with global partners; however, in the context of intricate Middle East problems, it is the regional dimension in Russian politics that comes to the fore. The complex dynamics of the situation's development requires from Moscow flexibility and readiness to heed concerns of various parties, while preserving ties that are fundamental to it.

This report analyses Russia's Middle East policy on examples of conflicts (Syrian, Israeli–Palestinian, and Libyan conflicts) and in the context of the development of the situation in North Africa, where the Russian Federation has a complex of interests. The Middle East conflicts in which Russia has found itself involved – as a direct participant or an honest broker – can serve as a good illustration of the variety of instruments and methods required, if not for the final settlement (which is always a long way ahead yet, as a rule), then at least for reducing the intensity of the conflict and moving it from a military to political confrontation.

An armed conflict draws people's attention to military means of responding to emerging threats and the role of force as a factor of deterrence and/or changing an unfavourable balance. Armed force plays a role in each of the conflicts under consideration. In Syria, it is used by external actors that exert direct military pressure on internal players. In Libya, the main burden of the military confrontation is carried by its direct participants. As regards the Palestinian conflict, we can only speak of individual crisis stages, which have an increasingly smaller impact on the general asymmetric balance of power.

A hot conflict can create more incentives to seek a settlement than stagnation, which accustoms people to think that they can adapt to such a conflict and live with it, ensuring their security with means that do not presuppose unpopular compromises. A combination of military and diplomatic measures, with military means now dominating, is characteristic of the Syrian conflict. In the Libyan conflict, political methods may dominate but their effectiveness depends on the institutionalization of domestic players, which will provide a more stable and predictable environment for international mediation.

In the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the role of external forces is reduced solely to political/diplomatic activities that, however, require much greater coordination of international efforts and joint breakthrough initiatives, which seems unlikely in the present conditions.

The Middle East conflicts are stable and have a long-term impact on the system of international relations in the region, but they do not reflect the entire variety of regional and extra-regional ties and do not always explain the logic of players. A broader view of the ongoing processes makes it possible to avoid a simplified reduction of the complex Middle East reality to the level of ‘conflict interaction’. In this regard, consideration of the situation in North Africa makes it possible to analyse not only security threats to Russia and areas where it may respond, but also economic and political interests of Russia.

Moscow Symphony

Syria. Allegro. The situation in Syria, despite some positive results achieved during the military defeat of ISIL, still does not look stable and close to settlement. The existing balance of power is fraught with new challenges and risks, and changes in it may become a demotivating factor for some opposition groups who hesitate to take part in negotiations without having strong positions for bargaining.

At the same time, part of the government elite can count on a military victory rather than dividends from negotiations. Meanwhile, the genetic dependence of many current states in the Middle East, including Syria, on external forces prevented the development of responsibility in local players

for the destiny of their own countries. They tend to position their low ability to reach agreement as adherence to principle, and their frequent reluctance to enter into any kind of contact and negotiations with the opposite side as a way to strengthen their positions for bargaining. In fact, this tactic seriously complicates efforts by external and regional states to stabilize the situation. Moreover, delays in settlement, in particular the long stagnation of the Geneva process, may have fatal consequences for Syria's statehood. Firstly, despite the positive experience in creating de-escalation zones, which have made it possible to significantly reduce the level of confrontation in some areas, they cannot be considered a panacea for violence. Serious military efforts should be made to oust terrorists from Jabhat al-Nusra and affiliated organizations from their positions. The intensity of military actions that the Assad government has to take with the support of the Russian Aerospace Forces has drawn criticism from a number of states, impeding the development of a coordinated international position on other important issues, as well. Secondly, if the de-escalation zones preserve their special status for a long time, they may turn into areas of influence of individual countries and some non-state actors, thereby threatening the very prospect of preserving a unified Syria.

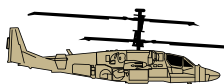
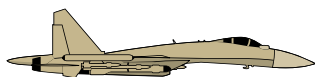
Recent months have seen a growing divergence of interests between the US and Russian coalitions as the interests of their individual members become increasingly different. For example, Turkey's military Operation Olive Branch, intended to drive out troops of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and create a buffer zone on the Syrian-Turkish border, was necessitated by Ankara's concern over the 'Kurdish terrorist threat', which has existential significance for it. But the armed actions of Turkey, which is a partner of Russia, against Kurds are at variance with the approaches of Moscow, which wants Kurdish interests to be heeded in a unified Syria, and the United States, which regards Kurds as allies in the fight against ISIL in Syria. The growing antagonism between Ankara and Damascus is another factor impeding settlement.

There are growing tensions in relations of Arab monarchies and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other. Israel has intensified the shelling of Hezbollah groups and government forces and even Iranian facilities in Syria, which is accepted understandingly by Sunni monarchies, above all Saudi Arabia. Paradoxically, Riyadh may view Israel's actions in Syria as a safety cushion. Israel's position finds full understanding in the US that considers pressure on Iran a major aspect of its Middle East policy and an element of bargaining in relations with Russia. At the same time, Russia, too, while maintaining a trusting working relationship with Israel, cannot ignore its concern over the possible

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



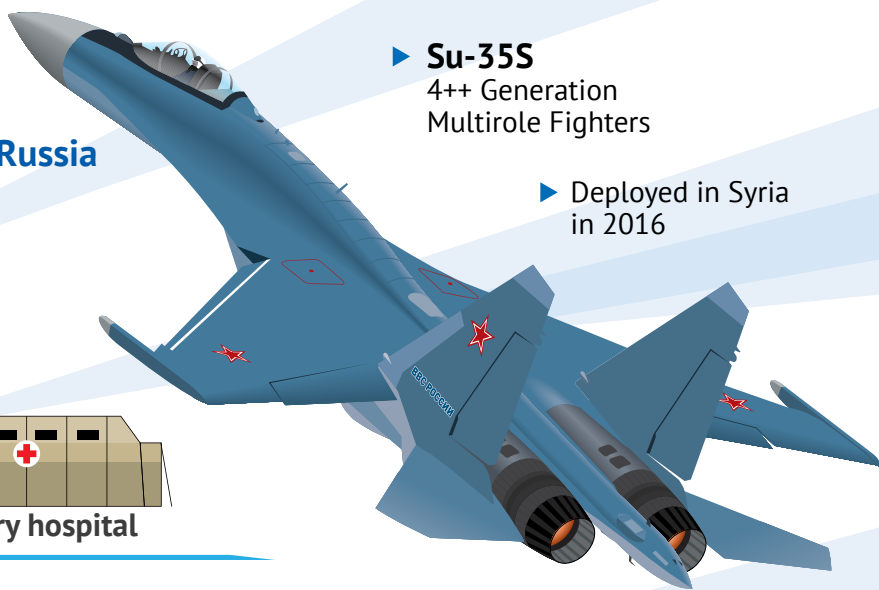
Special forces unit and military police



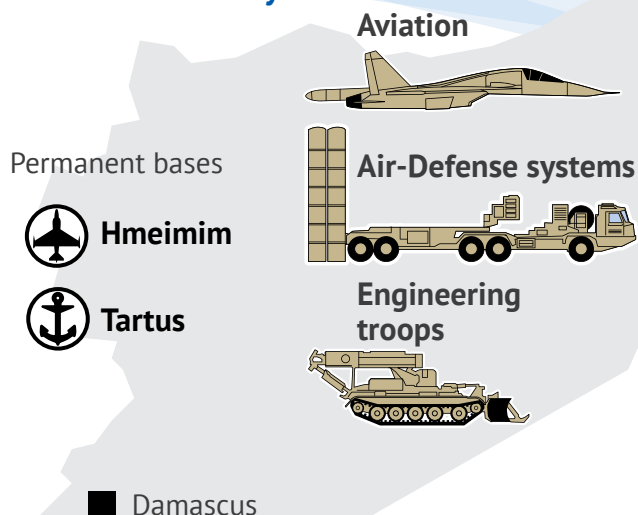
Military hospital

► **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

appearance of Iranian bases in Syria, the creation of a corridor from Iraq to Lebanon, or Hezbollah's advance to the border in the Golan Heights.

The task of coordinating efforts between the Russian Federation and the West in Syria has not been resolved and has so far been reduced to preserving a format that allows the parties to avoid a direct military confrontation and exchange information. Amid the general aggravation of relations in the world, the Syrian conflict not only has not reduced tensions but, on the contrary, has become a source of more discord. The prospect of a settlement that would keep Bashar al-Assad in power, even though during a transitional period in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254, arouses no enthusiasm among his political opponents, nor in the US and its allies, although they no longer demand Assad's resignation as a precondition. It can be assumed that, as the West will hardly succeed in forcing Assad to step down in the near future, one palliative measure may be to annex as much of the territory he controls as possible. Yet, even this task does not look realistic, given the radical changes in the balance of power. At the same time, the manipulation of Kurdish forces and US attempts to form Kurdish and Arab military forces, which would establish control over an important part of the Syrian territory, may lead to the creation of a quasi-state there, which would threaten the implementation of Resolution 2254 that provides for the preservation of the territorial integrity of Syria. Other direct and indirect participants in the confrontation, too, have plans of their own, which can lead to redrawing the Syrian map.

Recent months have seen major changes in the Syrian conflict proper and the situation related to it. The reformatting of the conflict, a process closely linked with the ongoing transformation of the entire world order, has been stepped up. In this context, experts and analysts, who participated in the Valdai Discussion Club Middle East Conference, pointed out several key points and discussed them in depth.

The multi-layered nature of this conflict has become even more pronounced than before. Efforts to smooth out differences between players of all three levels of the conflict – local, regional, and global – have failed. Moreover, the chance to soften them has clearly decreased, which complicates the settlement process.

The Syrian armed forces, supported by Russia and Iran, successfully continue to liberate the country from remnants of terrorist groups. The return

of refugees to the liberated territories continues. At the same time, the level of armed violence in the country has significantly decreased. Despite serious violations of the ceasefire in de-escalation zones, it is generally respected.

The undisguised military interference in the conflict by some global and regional actors, who invade Syria under false pretexts and who seek to annex various parts of its territory and establish the power of anti-government groups under their control there, has grown in scale. The actions of the United States, which, assisted by Britain and France, bombed government facilities in the country and which baselessly accused the Syrian armed forces of using chemical weapons, are a flagrant violation of international law. The US continues to establish military bases in Syrian territory.

The division in the Syrian opposition has deepened, which has reduced the possibility of its consolidated resistance to pro-government forces. At the same time, the concentration of thousands of militants from other regions of the country in Idlib province may lead to a new round in the armed confrontation if the settlement efforts fail.

There have formed three mutually complementary negotiation platforms. One is the Geneva negotiations held under the auspices of the United Nations and supported by the international community. Russia actively supports efforts of the United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, to advance the negotiation process between the Syrian government and the opposition. Another platform is the negotiations in Astana, where important decisions have been taken to reduce the level of armed violence in the country. The third platform is the recent Congress in Sochi attended by Syrian pro-government and opposition forces. There is also the Amman settlement format, where Russia, the United States, and Jordan have reached several agreements.

The recent division among countries that sponsor the Syrian armed opposition has had a significant impact on the situation. The factor that played a particularly important role here was the Qatar crisis that has weakened the ability of the sponsoring states to consolidate their efforts.

Interaction among Russia, Turkey, and Iran within the Troika format has deepened. These countries have minimized the impact of differences between them in approaches to the Syrian crisis and in their vision of Syria's future on cooperation between them.

Recent months have seen a growing role of the Kurdish factor and continued attempts by external players, primarily the United States, to manipulate Kurds for their own geopolitical ends.

Turkey has taken the leading position among sponsors of the Syrian opposition, and the largest opposition groups are now concentrated near the Turkish border.

Russia has been providing humanitarian assistance to the population of Syria on an ever-larger scale. It continues its efforts to convince Western partners of the need to join in the process of economic recovery and depoliticize this issue, whose solution is vital to the settlement of the crisis.

Libya. Moderato. Libya, which has not yet overcome the chaos that beset the country in 2011, remains a potential source of regional instability, which requires that Russia develop its own approaches and willingness to cooperate with other forces on the basis of the existing settlement plans. Russia has declared its support for the settlement plan proposed by the Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, Ghassan Salamé, and assessed his efforts as very positive (unlike the efforts of his predecessors). At the same time, the dynamics of the conflict and the specifics of the social and political situation in the country give grounds only for very moderate optimism.

The low degree of institutionalization of the political process, the lack of experience in building political organizations, and the over-militarization of society impede the formation of stable political actors. At the same time, an accelerated urbanization and a sharp increase in the population during the rule of Muammar Gaddafi has led to a partial disintegration of the tribal structure, which is now unable to serve as the basis for social order. As a result, whereas the settlement problem in Syria boils down to a search for mutually acceptable compromises, in Libya it is a search for stable political organizations. This problem can apparently be solved in three stages. The first involves cooperation with really functioning social and political organizations of the basic level – local councils and municipalities in cities, tribal councils, etc., which is done by numerous NGOs operating in the country and which is a major goal of the UN Mission. The second stage provides for achieving stable agreements between these organizations and armed groups. The third one is

the political legalization of newly established coalitions. The first and second stages are the most difficult ones; the participation of external mediators in them can be only limited, and their implementation will take a long time.

Simultaneously, there arises the question of whether or not state-building from the bottom can be supported and backed up by settlement from the top, especially as some institutions cannot be built from the bottom, while others already function, albeit not to full capacity. First of all, this concerns the republican army and other agents of legitimate violence, whose functions have been privatized by various non-state actors. Although the Libyan National Army, headed by Khalifa Haftar, wants to play a central role in this process, its political ambitions prevent it from becoming a nationwide institution. As a result, negotiations between Haftar and the government in Tripoli on the unification of armed forces are stuck on the political nature of the problem.

Recovery programmes can become a possible source for overcoming the political fragmentation in the country. The very desire for increased wellbeing through the use of natural resources and economic ties with the outside world can serve as the foundation for developing a national idea. Municipalities, tribal councils, and urban communities, which directly cater to the vital needs of the population, are now becoming basic organizations for restoring stateness. Their integration into a single system is possible through the restoration of the necessary social infrastructure.

Financial institutions are equally important for the country's unification. The *de facto* collapse of the single financial system, the emergence of an alternative central bank in the east, the lack of liquidity, and the simultaneous duplication of money issuing centres are signs of the final stage of disintegration and fragmentation of not only the political but also common economic space. Theoretically, however, the need to fulfil international contracts gives the international community an opportunity to promote country's unification.

Yet, despite the declared unity of approaches, the economic space remains divided. Regional actors project to Libya the same lines of confrontation that divide them in the Mashriq (Turkey–Qatar vs Egypt–Saudi Arabia–UAE), whereas the positions of global players here are fundamentally different. The US demonstrates its unpreparedness for deep involvement in Libyan affairs, while European countries not only cannot act unanimously but they increasingly compete with each other. This concerns, above all, France and Italy which

are ready to cooperate with any Libyan forces to pursue their own economic interests.

In these conditions, Moscow has declared a policy of 'equal proximity' to various parties to the Libyan conflict, which has manifested itself in numerous visits to Russia by representatives of Tripoli, Tobruk, Misurata, and other political centres. While maintaining an equal distance from all parties to the conflict, Moscow, nevertheless, invariably demonstrates its interest in the political process in Libya and readiness to work for its progress, playing a mediatory role which it knows very well.

Characteristically, Russia seeks to test new tools and channels for implementing its foreign policy in Libya. For example, apart from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Libyan issue is also in the focus of the leadership of Chechnya and the Contact Group for Intra-Libyan Settlement, set up by the Foreign Ministry and the State Duma and coordinating efforts of various departments. This 'polyphony' allows the Russian government to build relations with players across the entire political field of Libya.

Palestine. Lento. In the complex Middle East maze of parallel and mismatched interests, timid hopes, distrust, rational steps, and irrational assessments, the trusting relationship between Moscow and Palestinian leaders in addition to the good relations between Moscow and Tel Aviv create prerequisites for Russia's involvement in the Middle East settlement.

However, it is the settlement of this textbook protracted conflict, which the contemporary world has inherited as a Cold War legacy that has come across new difficulties of late. Negotiations are not held; international mediators do not propose new options and approaches; and it is only controversial statements by President Donald Trump that have unexpectedly brought the Palestinian issue to the international agenda again. The unilateral recognition by the United States of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and disregard for international obligations related to the Palestinian issue has caused predictable resistance from the Palestinians.

Indeed, in recent years, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been overshadowed by other, more acute armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and

Libya, which has even prompted some experts to conclude that the Middle East conflict has geographically moved to the Syrian–Iraqi subregion, where in fact the future of the Middle East is decided.

The revival of attention to the Palestinian issue is taking place in specific conditions, after several years of ‘oblivion’ which made the conflict develop in its own way. This situation is characterized by the continued establishment of Israeli settlements and changes on the ground, by a gradual degradation of Palestinian institutions, and a social and economic crisis in Gaza, where Hamas is increasingly less able to meet the basic needs of the population. According to UN experts, real per capita GDP in Gaza has decreased, while the demand for medical services, now provided more and more poorly, is growing. International aid plays an important role, but it cannot reverse the deterioration of the situation. The only source of fresh water in Gaza may be depleted in 2020, which poses a serious threat. People in Gaza already now experience power and water outages.

The basic settlement formula ‘two states for two peoples’ now looks increasingly problematic, because the territory in which a Palestinian state could be created has been shrinking, while politics is dominated by hardliners.

Factors that impede the resumption of negotiations include the Trump administration’s approach, which, for the first time over the years of American–Israeli strategic cooperation, coincide with the approaches of Israeli right-wing and religious circles. The latter advocate the preservation of the Israeli settlements and a united Jerusalem and oppose the return of the West Bank to Palestinian National Authority (PNA) control.

In a situation where prospects of negotiations look illusory, differences between the PNA and Hamas are only logical, despite the latter’s movement towards greater nationalism and more balanced decisions. The two organizations are less and less motivated to develop a common consolidated position that would provide for mutual compromises. After Mahmoud Abbas announced the termination of the Oslo process in response to Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the American embassy there, the very frameworks of the negotiation process are no longer clear.

At the regional level, the revival of interest in the Palestinian issue has not brought it back to the centre of the pan-Arab agenda. For the majority of the Arab world, the Palestinian problem is losing its role as the most important

mobilizing factor. Formerly, it was perceived as a matter of honour not only by the elites but also ordinary people whose reaction restrained attempts by the powers that be to reduce the burden of pan-Arab commitments. This consolidation rested on an anti-Israeli basis, and only political progress on the Palestinian track could be considered a legitimate basis for improving relations between Arabs and Israel. In the current Middle East context, Sunni Arab states, at least many of them, are faced with a serious threat to their identity, which not only causes them to pool efforts but also draws them closer to Israel even though the Palestinian problem is still not solved. This threat is Iran which, in the opinion of its Arab opponents, projects its power to the Arab world by taking an active part in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, and whose policy poses a threat to those Arab states where there are Shiite communities.

Iran poses an existential threat to Israel, too, and wants to destroy the country, according to the Israeli leadership. Tel Aviv insists that Iran has ties with anti-Israel organizations (for example, Hezbollah of Lebanon), a great military potential and the ability to resume its nuclear programme despite the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action concluded by Iran and the P5+1. Also, Tel Aviv claims, Iran does not intend to stop its missile programme. If necessary, Israel will be ready to launch a military strike against Iran. Notably, it was only recently that Israel admitted that its Air Force attacked a Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007.

A rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia on an anti-Iranian basis may seriously affect the Palestinian statehood. If Riyadh accepts the American plan, it can expect that obstacles to normalizing relations with Israel will be eliminated to launch a common struggle with Iran. In this case, the chances of the Palestinians to create a viable state of their own will significantly decrease.

The above-described alignment of forces shows the resource that Russia has to prevent a substitution of internationally accepted principles for the settlement of the Palestinian problem with unilateral schemes. Russia, which advocates joint efforts and an international settlement format, assigns great importance to cooperation with the US in this field, despite differences in their approaches. Meanwhile, Palestine does not consider the Middle East Quartet in its current composition (the Russian Federation, the United States, the EU, and the UN) an impartial and effective organization. A proposal to expand its composition to include the Arab League would look logical and might make the Quartet more balanced.

Special relations between Russia and direct parties to the conflict could play an important role in the settlement process. Russia has repeatedly tried to reconcile Fatah and Hamas and sharply criticized Israel's settlement policy in the UN. Russia and Israel have different attitudes towards the Palestinian problem, but their bilateral relations are marked by a high level of mutual respect, trust, and mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

At the same time, progress on the Palestinian track depends not only on the eventual resumption of bilateral Palestinian–Israeli negotiations; it requires changes in the regional context. Many regional and extra-regional forces view Iran as the main threat; therefore, their top priorities do not include Palestinians, who are free to accept the US plan or reject it without hope for help and support from once-active Arab donors. What needs to be done to reduce the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia? Is stabilization possible in the Syrian conflict, where Israel views the activity of Iran and Hezbollah as a direct threat?

These questions return us to the main thing. Russia develops relations with all parties to the conflict, but it cannot act alone, just like other participants in the Middle East drama, and is faced with serious risks. Currently, the Middle East not only generates challenges, but it also provides the international community with a unique opportunity to use conflicts in an instrumental manner to improve relations between global players that have been diverging from each other on an increasingly dangerous scale. One such conflict is the Palestinian problem.

Yemen.Largo. Of all regional conflicts in the Middle East, the Yemeni conflict is the most complex in structure, the most dramatic as regards humanitarian consequences, and the least noticed by the international community.

The widespread view that this conflict has a binary nature reflects only to a small extent the diversity of the military-political situation in the country. Whereas initially it was a war waged by the Houthi Ansarullah movement and the General People's Congress (GPC), led by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, against the Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi government, supported by Saudi Arabia, today the situation is much more complicated.

According to official data, about 10,000 people have died in the conflict since the beginning of foreign intervention in 2015. However, due to the destruction of the basic public utility infrastructure over the same period, more than three quarters of the population (22.2 million people) need humanitarian assistance – about 18 million people suffer from constant malnutrition, more than 16 million people lack fresh water, and more than a million have been infected with cholera.

It would seem that the sharp aggravation of the humanitarian situation in northern Yemen, controlled by Houthis, the GPC, and the tribes of Hashid and Bakil, should have changed their request positions. However, this did not happen. Saleh's turnaround towards cooperation with the enemy in December 2017 was described by them as a conspiracy attempt in favor of the enemy, and the subsequent assassination of the former president provoked a new round of violence.

At the same time, territorial fragmentation increased in southern Yemen – in May 2017, the main city of the south, Aden, and the oil-richest Hadhramaut Governorate in the east announced the establishment of their own self-government bodies, seeking de facto independence from the Hadi administration.

As a result, even without taking into account external forces, there are now at least five parties to the conflict: Ansarullah, who has taken power in Sana'a; the Salafi Al-Islah party, supported militarily by General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar; separatist movements of southern Yemen and Hadhramaut; Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); and ISIL, operating in some areas in the south of the country. At the domestic political level, the conflict is simultaneously religious, tribal, territorial, and ideological. The confrontation is made even more acute by the chronic and growing scarcity of resources, from which Yemeni society suffers, and by the involvement of external forces in the conflict.

The latter are represented almost exclusively by regional actors: Iran, Saudi Arabia with allies, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. The degree of involvement of Iran and its allies from among non-state actors, like Hezbollah, in supporting Houthis is still not clear. At the same time, for Saudi Arabia, the conflict has long become a major factor of its foreign policy. The expensive operation has not brought any serious results, while relations with coalition

allies have become more and more intricate. Kuwait and Oman from the very beginning showed no enthusiasm and tried to play a mediatory role. Qatar froze its participation after the deterioration of its relations with other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, and now it is contemplating radically changing its position. Abu Dhabi is becoming a more and more obvious rival to Riyadh, as it supports separatist movements in southern Yemen.

This complex picture of confrontation between regional players is a consequence of the growing struggle for leadership in the Gulf. Efforts to project regional differences to the difficult internal political situation results in instrumentalizing the Yemen conflict in international relations, thus making its original content increasingly subordinate to the agenda of external actors.

At the same time, global players avoid broadcasting their other differences to Yemen and unanimously support a political settlement. Theoretically, Yemen could be a field for cooperation between Russia and Western countries, although in all other areas relations between them keep deteriorating. There is a probability, however, that Moscow's greater involvement in Yemen's affairs may bring about the opposite result, and the country may turn into another field of confrontation between global players.

Partly because of these fears, partly because of the need to save scarce resources, and partly because of the fear to break the delicate balance in relations with key states in the region, Moscow is not very active in its policy towards Yemen.

Maghreb. Presto? North Africa has never been a priority for Russia. As part of the Middle Eastern or, sometimes, Mediterranean agenda, it has invariably played, and still does, a peripheral role in Moscow's regional strategies.

Moscow views North Africa mainly in the context of Russian–European relations and through the prism of geopolitical interests and strategic security issues. Therefore, the Southern Mediterranean and the Mediterranean basin in general are territories where Russia may build up its military and political influence, which is especially important in the context of the growing confrontation between Russia and the West.

In the Middle East perspective, North Africa is acquiring a more independent significance. Russia's policy towards the region follows that same logic that determines its strategy towards the Mashreq countries, and is aimed at capitalizing successes achieved there. Accordingly, it is determined by Russia's economic interests and the need to minimize security threats stemming from the region. The latter factor, in Russia's view, requires strengthening stateness in countries of the subregion and reducing the level of the terrorist threat.

Meanwhile, most of North African countries have over recent years demonstrated relative stability in the face of systemic challenges to stateness and terrorist threats. Therefore, Russia's policy towards these countries is filled with new content. For example, relations with Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia are driven by economy, while those with Algeria, by military-technical cooperation, which is now on the rise after the successful operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria.

Back in 2001, Moscow signed an agreement on strategic partnership with Algeria. After that, trade between the two countries, which exceeds \$4 billion, has mainly been done in arms – more than 90 per cent of weapons imported by Algeria come from Russia.² Russian–Moroccan trade is much lower, but it is not only actively developing but also has a basically different structure, with farm produce holding the central place. Medium and small businesses are important participants in this trade, which helps form deeper and more balanced economic relations with Morocco than with Algeria.

The visits by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to Algeria and Morocco in early October 2017 demonstrated Moscow's desire to maintain balance in relations with the two leading states of the Maghreb. The parties discussed mostly economic issues and signed several agreements. The agreements with Algeria were related to restrictions on oil and gas production, the development of nuclear energy³ and, according to some sources,⁴ supplies of S-400 systems and Su-32 and Su-34 aircraft and the establishment of joint ventures with Russia's Uralvagonzavod to produce railroad vehicles and Kamaz lorries in this country. The agreements with Morocco were related, apart from agriculture, also to energy and security issues.

² Lamlili, N, 2016, 'Mansouria Mokhefi: «L'Algérie cherche à réaffirmer la primauté de ses relations avec la Russie»', *Jeune Afrique*. 27 avril. Available from: <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/321456/politique/mansouria-mokhefi-algerie-cherche-a-reaffirmer-primaute-de-relations-russie/>

³ 'Dmitri Medvedev veut renforcer l'influence de la Russie au Maroc et en Algérie', *Afric24 Monde*. Available from: <http://africa24monde.com/actualite/view/dmitri-medvedev-veut-renforcer-l-influence-de-la-russie-au-maroc-et-en-algerie.html>

⁴ Meddi, A, 2017, 'Dmitri Medvedev à Alger: Moscou retrouve le chemin du Maghreb', *Le Point Afrique*, 10 octobre. Available from: http://afrique.lepoint.fr/economie/dmitri-medvedev-a-alger-moscou-retrouve-le-chemin-du-maghreb-10-10-2017-2163406_2258.php

The pedantic parallelism displayed by Moscow in building economic relations with Algeria and Morocco fits well with its policy of distancing itself from the problem of Western Sahara. The latter has long disappeared from the top of the international agenda, but it is still acute for the Western Maghreb. In the post-Soviet period, Russia has sought to avoid taking a clearly pro-Algerian position on this issue, although it has not broken ties with the Polisario Front. Annual visits of its leaders to Moscow show the latter's desire to preserve the potential of influence in case the situation worsens.

Economy remains the key element of Russian–Tunisian relations, as well. After a brief crisis in Moscow's relations with Turkey and the suspension of direct flights to Egypt, many Russian tourists have chosen Tunisia as a holiday destination in recent years, bringing Russia to the top of the list of international tourists to this country.

Although Moscow does not use its relations with Polisario, military-technical cooperation with Algeria and cooperation in tourism with Tunisia to promote its political interests in the Maghreb, these factors have a great potential for that, which can be used if necessary.

Russia's interaction with European countries in North Africa could help improve the climate in Russian–European relations. Moscow's competition with EU states, above all France, in some economic areas and arms trade (Algeria, Libya, and Egypt) does not prevent the parties from interacting on political issues. However, given the foreign policy pragmatism of the Russian leadership, such cooperation – on security issues and fight against terrorism and illegal migration – should be politically motivated and bring clear political benefits for Russia.

With the confrontation escalating, military-political elements of regional politics are becoming increasingly important. The reunification of Crimea with Russia, the rapprochement with Turkey, the modernization of a naval base in Tartus, and the establishment of a military base at Khmeimim necessitates the resumption of a permanent presence of the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean Sea and the return of the Fifth Naval Squadron there. The latter may require the creation of a deep-water base in confirmation of long-term guarantees on straits from Turkey. The implementation of this scenario may in the long term lead to fundamental changes in the military-political situation in the Mediterranean.

However, it has limitations of its own. Turkey's status as a NATO member and differences between Moscow and Ankara on other tracks do not allow the two countries to elevate their bilateral relations to the level of a strategic partnership. There are numerous rumours that Russia is creating military bases in Sudan, Egypt, and Libya. Although sometimes based on real agreements, these rumours remain rumors, often used in the media space both by Moscow allies and its opponents. The internal fragility of Russia's partners is a serious restrictive factor for implementing such projects. Placing emphasis on security issues in foreign policy and making security an element of Russian exports, which is more and more in demand in an increasingly insecure world, stimulates a search for ways to overcome these obstacles.

Russia's Middle East policy is constantly put to the test. Under the influence of rapidly changing events provoked by ill thought-out actions of other actors, Moscow's present military and political successes can be viewed as a result of excessive involvement with ensuing consequences. The Middle East has always been a destroyer of reputations – local players sought to make their external partners play by their own rules and thereby often decreased the value and diluted policies of the leading powers. Realizing this, Russia is not only distancing itself from overly friendly embraces but also developing a clear and relatively easily realizable strategy for withdrawal. It does not mean breaking traditional ties or giving up mutually beneficial contracts, but it establishes red lines for players who perform parts of their own against the background of a powerful symphony of its multi-vector policy.

At the same time, global forces, too, should not mix different genres, associating someone else's and unproven sins with Russia. The danger is not in a return to the Cold War but in the emergence of a new format of interaction, devoid of checks that formerly prevented global powers from slipping into a direct military clash in the region. An alternative is a search for joint approaches to the further political, social and economic development of the Middle East, during which cannons will at last be silenced and local forces will start looking for a more euphonic melody.

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