



Middle East: Evolution.

2010–2025

*The Collection of Reports was prepared by the team
of The Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club*

The Middle East is a region characterized by constant change. There has not been a single century, or even decade, without a visible transformation of the landscape. However, there is another distinctive feature: no transformation can erase the past, leaving a clean slate to start anew. The past and future are intertwined, sometimes indistinguishably so. This compilation is a chronicle of the contemporary development of the Middle East, as documented by the Valdai Discussion Club and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. It presents a selection of over fifteen years' worth of thematic reports prepared for the annual Middle East conferences organized by the Valdai Club. This is fantastic reading for anyone who seeks to unravel the complex political enigmas that characterize this region, both timeless and ever-evolving.

The organizations and movements mentioned in this Collection of reports – the Muslim Brotherhood, the Taliban, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIS-Khorasan (The Islamic State – Khorasan Province), Wilayat Sinai (Islamic State – Sinai Province), Al-Qaeda, The Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – are recognized as terrorist organizations and banned within the territory of the Russian Federation.

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Introduction

The current situation in the Middle East stands out, even against the backdrop of the dizzying shenanigans that the world has seen play out for over thirty years. Attempts to maintain a status quo that is acceptable to most political actors, have led to an inevitable fiasco. Taking shots in the dark has emerged as a favourite pastime among arrogant pundits who dare to predict the region's future. One example is the statement made by former US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who a few days before October 7, 2023 declared that the Middle East was “quieter than it has been in two decades.” Then something happened that caused even experienced observers to throw up their hands...

However, standing out from the general background, this part of the world is in a kind of “harmony” with the rest of the international system. One could even say that it foreshadows the processes that are unfolding at the global level. Acute conflict coupled with close interconnectedness has been characteristic of the region stretching from North Africa to South Asia since time immemorial, as well as complicated collisions involving players of different calibres, both external and internal, when it is not always clear who is taking advantage of whom. In the Middle East, this phenomenon is particularly prevalent, and one might even describe it as a tradition that was once considered a local peculiarity. However, it is now evident that the entire world is grappling with similar dynamics.

The inability to resolve contradictions, even through war, is combined with the impossibility of separation; the parties cannot distance themselves from one another. The situation is distressing, yet increasingly typical and almost ubiquitous. It suddenly became clear that the Middle East, once considered the “sick man of the world”, has now not so much recovered as the disease has spread to others, but has turned out to be better adapted to fight the disease than those who had not previously experienced such symptoms.

Delving into the study of the Middle East serves as an effective antidote to such misconceptions as the “end of history” spread by American dreamers after the Cold War. This region, where human history, so to speak, commenced most convincingly shows that it does not stop and will never end. As one turns the pages of history, one continually encounters enlightening chapters, both in the distant past and in more recent times. These chapters do not serve as educational in the sense of general development or even in terms of learning lessons (for no one ever learns lessons from history). Rather, they offer insights into understanding the ever-relevant processes, as well as the boundaries of what is possible and what is not. The accumulation of analytical knowledge about this region ultimately contributes to a deeper comprehension of the broader global events.

The Valdai Discussion Club and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences have been monitoring the changing Middle East for over a decade and a half. The annual Middle East conferences of the Valdai Club consistently mark significant milestones in events, and even in this historically short period, many have taken place. We began the project at the end of what was called “democracy promotion” in the United States. This was at the end of the 2000s, when the dust of regional instability stirred up by the Iraqi war and its immediate consequences had just begun to settle. But this proved to be short-lived – the “Arab Spring”, followed by a qualitatively new rise of radicalism, which even tried to institutionalize itself as a new type of “state”, another intervention from outside (which was largely forced), the growth of ambitions of regional powers, a crisis in the policies of major international actors, and so on. Now we are in the midst of a transformation that began in the early years of this century, and the end is not even approximately in sight. As always in this part of the world, the archaic and the most modern trends are inextricably intertwined, and this is again a kind of harbinger of what is already happening everywhere.

Compiling this collection of Valdai Club reports authored by our colleagues from the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences evoked a mixed range of emotions. We were elated that the majority of these texts retained their relevance and continue to be highly valuable for practical work. However, we were also saddened by the realization that this indicates that the pressing issues of the region remain unresolved and are accumulating rather than being addressed. In this context, the Russian saying that one cannot break a hammer with a whip is particularly apt. Even the brightest minds of academia and professional practice find themselves powerless in the face of conflicts and contradictions that extend far into the historical past and involve a multitude of interested parties from across the globe. Let us be realistic and just try to understand. And if this understanding leads to some practical solutions, that would be an added bonus.

We are particularly delighted to present this account of collective effort, as its permanent leader and source of inspiration is Vitaly Naumkin, a full member of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Academic Director of its Institute of Oriental Studies. In addition to his many academic and public achievements, he is a trusted friend of the Valdai Club and a constant partner and advisor on almost all endeavours. He will soon turn eighty, but, first of all, for a scholar, that is not old at all, and secondly (as we know from our joint work), it is hardly possible to believe that Academician Naumkin's biological age corresponds to his years – not everyone has so much energy even in their thirties.

We pledge to publish the next, equally comprehensive compilation of the Valdai Club reports under the expert guidance of Vitaly Naumkin in time for the next anniversary. Will the Middle East problems have been resolved by then? Something tells me that they will not. Will we make progress in our comprehension of them? Without a doubt, we will!

*Fyodor Lukyanov, Research Director
of the Valdai Discussion Club*

The Middle East Conflict: In Search of a Solution

Malta, December 9–10, 2010

This report was written at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Oriental Studies following the international conference entitled "Scenarios and Models of the Middle East Settlement," organized by the Russian News & Information Agency RIA Novosti, the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy on Malta on December 9–10, 2010.

The main authors of the report are Doctor of History, Professor Vitaly Naumkin and Doctor of History, Professor Irina Zvyagelskaya, who also took into consideration the proposals of discussion participants from Russia Alexander Aksyonenok, Andrei Baklanov, Tatyana Nosenko and Veniamin Popov, as well as their foreign colleagues Gershon Baskin, Yehuda Ben Meir, Shlomo Brom, Rami Dajani, Wassim Kalaajieh, Habib Malik, Mathias Mossberg, Sahar Qawasmi, Paul Saunders, Patrick Seale, Mohamed Shaker, Mustapha Tlili.

Despite the efforts of the international Quartet of intermediaries and the Obama administration, the search for a solution to the Middle East conflict has reached yet another impasse, and the restoration of a lasting peace in the region is increasingly viewed as a near impossible task. In that light, it seems necessary to revise current approaches to the problem and return to some previously abandoned ideas that may now help move the process out of deadlock, as well as develop new initiatives that could lead to its resolution.

1. Emerging trends in the Middle East

The habitual tensions in Arab-Israeli relations are now matched with circumstances that could seriously complicate the already difficult search for a lasting peace. These include the failure to restart Palestinian-Israeli talks, the growing hostility between Israel and Iran, and the peace process's dependence on the vested interests of new regional players, above all Turkey and Iran.

Iran is now seen as a direct party to the conflict in light of its aggressive expansion of influence in Iraq, from which the United States has started to retreat, as well as its support of Lebanon's Hezbollah and Gaza's Hamas movements and its promotion of closer ties with Syria. Iran's nuclear program, which the West and Israel suspect is aimed at the creation of nuclear weapons, is seen in Israel and some Persian Gulf countries as a direct threat to their security – one that could change the existing balance of power in the region.

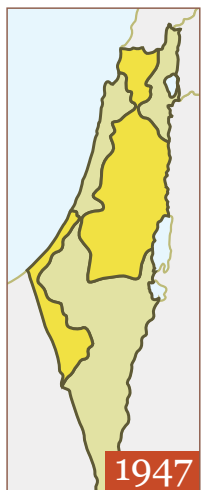
At the same time, there have been more calls for Israel to support the plan for a regional zone free from weapons of mass destruction, thus increasing the prospects for peace. The lack of a positive change in the Arab-Israeli peace process on both the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian tracks could make Iran's active position in the region attractive to Arab countries in which the people see their government's approach to the problem as a compromise or even a betrayal.

Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey, which has traditionally positioned itself as a defender of NATO's southern flank, is attempting to re-integrate itself into the Middle East with the Palestinian problem as its justi-

History of Middle East Conflict



The League of Nations issues Britain a mandate to govern Palestine, formerly part of the Ottoman Empire



The UN approves a plan for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish state (56% of the territory) and an Arab one (44% of the territory), with Jerusalem under international rule



The State of Israel is declared



fiction. This effort could be fueled not so much by the ideology of the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP, or AKP in Turkish), as by a desire to leverage the situation to accelerate Turkey's entry into the European Union.

On the other hand, Turkey's true intentions could stem from its weariness of useless attempts at rapprochement with the EU and a desire to achieve its main geopolitical goal: becoming the most influential force in the region via its economic successes and a leader of the Muslim world. This could naturally be compounded with the fear of losing Muslim voters dissatisfied with the country's strategic partnership with Israel, whose policy is sharply criticized in the Muslim world.

History of Middle East Conflict



The first Arab-Israeli war initiated by Arab states that do not recognize the partition of Palestine. Israel occupies more than half of the territory granted to the Arab states, with Jordan occupying the West Bank and East Jerusalem and Egypt occupying the Gaza Strip



The UN passes Resolution 194 demanding that Palestinian refugees be allowed to return home as soon as possible



The Suez Crisis: the tripartite aggression of Britain, France and Israel against Egypt following the nationalization of the Suez Canal

2012

Japan and China's interest in the Middle East has grown: both countries seek stability in the region, but are not yet sufficiently involved in diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution.

2013

Although he has done much to revive peace talks, President Barack Obama, who has tried to put U.S. policy toward its Arab partners and Israel on an equal footing, could not make a sustained effort to advance the peace process because of changes in the domestic situation of the United States. Republicans prevailed in recent congressional elections, and as a result, Obama will be able to proceed with an active Middle East policy only if he is elected for a second term and given a free hand.

2016

However, it is very difficult to gauge his prospects for re-election. The U.S. president is facing strong resistance from Republicans, the Israeli lobby, and other political adversaries who are using his new policy on Israel to undermine his political standing at home.

2017

Countries in the region and beyond were surprised when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected recent U.S. proposals, embarrassing Obama, who had said he would mediate the problem if Israel stopped building new settlements in the West Bank. Obama later withdrew his proposal, demanding instead that Palestinians and Israelis unconditionally resume direct talks. Arab countries saw that change as a sign of Obama's weakness and inability

2018

2019

2020

History of Middle East Conflict



Israel launches a war against Egypt, Syria and Jordan and fully occupies the West Bank of the River Jordan, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, the Syrian Golan Heights and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula (returned to Egypt in 1979)



The UN Security Council's Resolution 242 calls on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories in the summer of 1967 and resolve the problem of Palestinian refugees



The War of Attrition, a low-intensity war between Egypt and Israel

2021

2022

2023

2024

2025



to force Israel into making concessions. As a result, countries in the region are reevaluating the U.S. president's personal standing as well as his administration's ability to promote peace in the region.

When Obama came to power, the international Quartet of Russia, the United States, the EU, and the UN stepped back and recognized the leading role, if not the monopoly, of the United States in the Middle East peace process, while simultaneously acknowledging the diminished potential for other members of the Quartet to influence the process. The only advantage of this situation is that the responsibility for failing to sustain the peace process now lies with Washington and Barack Obama personally, even as it has become one of the biggest blows to his reputation.

The idea of holding an international Middle East conference in Moscow, which was advocated by Russia and supported by Arab countries as well as several European countries, does not hold much promise and could damage Russia's international standing if pursued.

Under these circumstances, there has been a shift in the respective positions of the Quartet members. The EU has adopted a new approach to some aspects of the conflict, with some EU countries now demanding that the blockade of the Gaza Strip be ended and that the number of negotiating countries be expanded. Public support in Europe is growing for the idea of unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state as soon as the relevant state institutions have been strengthened in the West Bank.

Russia has not yet abandoned the idea of organizing an international conference in Moscow, but the plan should be adjusted according to the circumstances currently surrounding the conflict. For example, the agenda of the conference could focus on multilateral talks regarding issues that have a chance of being successful.

History of Middle East Conflict



1973

1973 Arab-Israeli War: Syria and Egypt attack Israel seeking to reclaim the lands occupied by Israel in 1967. Israel holds off the attack



1973

The UN Security Council passes Resolution 338 calling on the parties to the conflict to immediately start negotiations under UN auspices in order to establish a just and lasting peace in the Middle East

Arab summits in Algiers (1973) and Rabat (1974) recognize the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Arab people of Palestine

1973-1974

2. Scenarios of development

Considering all of the above, we can put forth several scenarios for the possible future of the situation.

2.1. Diplomatic deadlock

Negotiations may remain deadlocked as long as the political situation in Israel stays the same, and in its current condition, it is hardly conducive to breakthroughs. Netanyahu's coalition government, comprised of extreme right-wing politicians, was able to secure the retraction of American demands for a new settlement freeze as a Palestinian condition for resuming talks (Netanyahu claims that the Obama administration withdrew the demand of its own accord). Meanwhile, Israel wants to continue building settlements to ensure that it reaps the advantages of a protracted peace process, while banking on public opinion at home, which no longer favors the Palestinians. The demand that Palestinians recognize the Jewish nature of Israel as a precondition for resolution has also been advanced to appease those who fear the emergence of a binational Jewish-Arab state.

The current stalemate is also largely the result of the Israeli government's unwillingness to make concessions – an attitude confirmed in the positions of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu ("Israel Is Our Home") party, observant believers, and the ideology of the Likud itself. However, this does not mean that Netanyahu will not change his ap-

History of Middle East Conflict



Israel and Egypt sign a peace treaty at Camp David whereby Israel later withdraws its occupation of the Sinai Peninsula



Israel invades Lebanon, occupying much of its territory and pushing out Palestinian resistance forces. The occupation lasted until 1985. South Lebanon was liberated in 2000



Lebanon and Israel sign a peace agreement, but it is annulled by Lebanon a year later

proach; at stake is his ambition to go down in history as the politician who settled the conflict on conditions favorable for Israel.

Division in the Palestinian movement is playing into the hands of Israeli politicians opposed to negotiation, and perpetually foundering Palestinian-Israeli relations have been further undermined by the dysfunctional political systems of both governments. The Israeli prime minister is trying to preserve his weak coalition government by glossing over strategic problems, while the Palestinian negotiators have lost legitimacy after the government's split. Mutual mistrust and a lack of progress on the way to a resolution have created a vacuum and encouraged the search for prospects beyond the traditional two-state solution.

2.2. A functional status quo

This scenario is also not likely to produce any breakthroughs, but positive change is possible if the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) pursues a more active policy in the West Bank. The PNA leadership is now counting on the development of Palestinian state institutions able to effectively govern the territories under their control and lay a solid foundation for the declaration of a Palestinian state.

The hope for this possibility lies in part with Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayad. Under his command, the burgeoning Palestinian security forces are increasingly coordinating their activities with the Israeli army, and there is evidence that such coordination could reach new levels. The Oslo Accords signed on the issue initially proved impracticable, and only now is such cooperation between the two sides being realized for the first time.

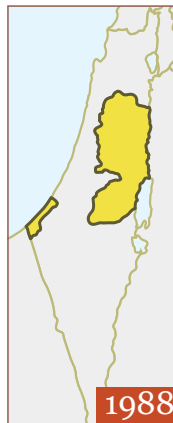


The current coordination of their efforts largely reflects both sides' interest in limiting the influence of Hamas and other radical movements in the West Bank, which pose challenges to both parties.

The situation in the Gaza Strip and its surrounding environs has meanwhile been changing. Hamas has taken a more responsible stand: it no longer resorts to shelling Israel and has even tried to prevent other radical organizations from taking aggressive action in order to maintain its truce with the Israeli government. Hamas' offers of hudna (truce or ceasefire) are based on religious principles, indicating respect for the obligations the movement has assumed. The latest truce was negotiated in contact with Israel and therefore can be viewed not as an enforced unilateral concession but as a mutual contract. According



The First Intifada. A popular uprising of the inhabitants of Palestinian territories against the Israeli occupation



The PLO declares the creation of a Palestinian state within the post-1967 borders and the formation of a Palestinian government-in-exile

The Madrid Middle East peace conference held at the initiative of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. is attended by Israel and four Arab delegations including a Palestinian-Jordanian one

1991

to Hamas, hudna need not be limited in time but may last for years, until a new generation of politicians takes over.

Moreover, Hamas representatives have said they are ready to accept a settlement if PNA President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) negotiates it, but only if it gets a majority vote during a referendum involving all Palestinians, including refugees. Although such a referendum will certainly bury any solution of compromise, some experts see Hamas' position as a retreat from its formerly rigid ideological stance, which excluded any agreements with Israel, although its rhetoric has remained quite severe.

At the same time, Hamas is gradually changing its phraseology. Many countries maintain secret ties with Hamas, which has not only opponents but also friends in the Arab world. Hamas leaders are meeting with European politicians, have gone on air, and have started choosing their words more carefully, even admitting their provisional status. They were able to put an end to the chaos in the Gaza Strip. Hamas has not recognized Israel, but it does not deny its existence or the possibility of creating a neighboring Palestinian state.

Israel thinks that new security measures will force Hamas to become more moderate. In Israel, it is believed that the development of the Iron Dome air defense system, the strengthening and protection of border settlements,

History of Middle East Conflict

U.S.-mediated talks behind closed doors in Oslo between Israel, represented by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), represented by Mahmoud Abbas, aimed at settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and crowned with the signing of a joint declaration of principles in Washington on September 13, 1993. Under the document, local self-government is introduced in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank for five years, which is supposed to lead to a permanent settlement

1993



Israel and Jordan sign a peace treaty

The start of direct peace negotiations between Syria and Israel (suspended in 1996)



The assassination of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist deals a blow to the peace process



a powerful control system along the coast, and massive responses to any shelling, even minor incidents, have encouraged Hamas to keep the truce.

However, Hamas' principles and strategy have not changed, which prevents it from participating in peace talks. Another setback is that the organization does not have a single leader capable of garnering universal recognition. Its structure prevents leaders Khaled Mashaal and Ismail Haniyeh from making unilateral decisions, which must be undertaken at the level of Hamas' three main structures – in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, and in the Palestinian diaspora in other Arab countries (primarily Syria). This complex political system complicates decisive changes in the organization's fundamental ideology while placing further obstacles in its path toward relevant policy changes.

History of Middle East Conflict



The Second Intifada. A wave of terrorist attacks in Israel and retaliation accompanied by massive casualties on both sides and bringing the negotiations to a halt

The Diplomatic Quartet of international mediators develops a road map for peace

Israel builds a wall of protection, destroys the infrastructure of Palestinian paramilitary groups in the West Bank

2002



Yasser Arafat, the first president of the Palestinian National Authority, dies

Iran's assistance is another factor working to strengthen Hamas' militant position, although its connections with Iran complicate the organization's pro-Arab political orientation. Relations with Iran are part of a strategic alliance for Hamas, and they do not rule out a strategic rivalry, even though Iran was the only country that aided Hamas in its hour of need.

The blockade of the Gaza Strip has still not been completely imposed: there is a route into Egypt, and Gaza residents may export and import many of the goods they need. On December 9, 2010, Israel decided to open additional corridors on the Gaza border. Thanks to the efforts of Egypt and the Israeli army, the torrent of arms deliveries to Hamas has been reduced to a mere trickle. Hamas has also been furtively cooperating with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on security issues, indicating that Israel could be quietly trying to learn to coexist with its neighbor.

In this case, the status quo could become a functional situation that could be seen as a transition period in preparation for holding talks and signing agreements. However, these goals cannot be achieved without international assistance.

2.3. The resumption of Palestinian-Israeli talks

The eventual resumption of peace talks depends directly on changes in the Israeli government's position. Israelis are increasingly skeptical about the latest U.S. plans. Some of them think that President Obama is so eager to regain Muslims' trust that he will attempt to achieve that goal even at the ex-

History of Middle East Conflict



Israel withdraws its troops from Gaza and dismantles Jewish settlements there, ending the 38-year occupation of the Palestinian enclave



The Second Lebanon War. An armed clash between the state of Israel and the radical Shiite group Hezbollah which effectively controlled the southern parts of Lebanon



pense of Israel's vested interests. This belief has been bolstered by the fact that the U.S. administration has downgraded Israel's status in U.S. foreign policy priorities.

Netanyahu is not likely to do the bidding of the United States or any other international mediator. Even if he decides that a compromise is worthwhile, his ability to maneuver will be limited by the positions of the right wing and the religious parties and politicians comprising his coalition government, in particular Foreign Minister Lieberman. The foreign minister's strict and uncompromising attitude has already helped him consolidate a considerable part of the Israeli electorate around his political agenda.

History of Middle East Conflict



The Annapolis Conference marks the resumption of Palestinian-Israeli peace talks after a seven-year break

Turkey brokers resumption of Israeli-Syrian talks

2008



Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza leads to the suspension of Palestinian-Israeli and Israeli-Syrian peace talks

Israelis and Palestinians resume peace talks. But the dialogue is soon suspended because of disagreements over the settlements issue

2010



Although a significant portion of Israelis share Lieberman's ideology and political approach, his reputation is another matter. Often regarded as a mafia boss, Lieberman is said to be involved in corruption, fraud, money laundering, and abuse of public trust. If the investigation launched against him is successfully continued, he may have to leave the government in six months, allowing for the possibility of a new coalition.

Since the Israeli Labor Party (Avoda) has all but left the political stage, Netanyahu will have to invite Kadima, a centrist party with more moderate views on reconciliation, into the new coalition. Kadima could then provide Netanyahu with a scapegoat for unpopular decisions, giving him a freer hand despite his rigid ideological positions.

If this does not happen, right-wing Israelis, who were always willing to settle across Palestine without any concern for the Arab population, will have to admit that if Israel annexes Palestinian lands, it will become a colonial empire and thus not a democratic state by definition.

Sentiment in support of annexation has lately grown stronger in Israel, but the idea of direct and open annexation of the West Bank now looks like a completely anachronistic position. Some ultra-right Israeli politicians have suggested creating a state where Palestinians will be gradually granted citizenship.

Strangely, this concept is in line with the approach of a growing number of Palestinians, who would opt for a single binational state in which they would dominate society demographically and, eventually, politically.

Given the above, we can assume that Palestinian-Israeli talks may be resumed but are unlikely to be stable. The agenda for such talks requires great compromise and a high level of motivation on both sides, which is so far lacking.

The deadlocked talks and the failure of the policy pursued by Abu Mazen and his colleagues give Hamas a chance to bolster its influence along with the fraught possibility of moderate Palestinians losing power in the West Bank. The rise of Islamic radicalism can be prevented only by active steps taken

**The State of Israel****Palestine****Date of establishment**

May 14, 1948



?

Area¹

22,072 sq. km



6220 sq. km

Population²

7,683,900



3.94 million

Population density

348.1 per sq. km



632.7 per sq. km

GDP¹

\$195.4 billion



\$6.6 billion

Per-capita GDP¹

\$28,600



\$2,900

Population below the poverty line¹

23.6%



The West Bank: 46%
The Gaza Strip: 70%



Establishment of diplomatic
relations with Russia (USSR)
1948³



Establishment of diplomatic
relations with Russia (USSR)
1974⁴

¹ According to CIA and The World Factbook data. Total areas under the 1949 demarcation line ("green line") agreements. Israel has occupied territories, including East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights

² Source: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (November 2010 data) and the Palestine National Authority (2009 data, minus refugees)

³ Soviet-Israeli diplomatic relations were broken off in 1967 and reinstated in 1991

⁴ Establishment of official relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization



to resolve the Palestinian problem, which is no less important now than fighting Islamic radicals in Afghanistan.

2.4. Local armed conflict

This scenario cannot be ruled out considering the position of radicals in and outside of Hamas and Hezbollah. A strike at Gaza in response to the bombing of Israel – either by Hamas or Islamic Jihad – is fully possible. However, neither side seems to be interested in starting a new large-scale military operation.

For the predominantly Shiite Hezbollah, relations with Iran are of strategic importance, but are not in themselves likely to push the movement's leaders toward reckless action. In fact, Iran itself is not interested in a regional conflict – its true interests lie in continual pressure on Israel rather than a large-scale conflict with an unpredictable outcome.

The current policy of deterrence between Hezbollah and Israel has taught both sides to regard a disturbance of the status quo as a possibility for unacceptable losses. On the other hand, Hezbollah is taking advantage of an Israeli threat as an impetus for further legitimacy.

Their border with Israel is currently quiet, and Hezbollah leaders have no need for unnecessary risks, although the possibility of unexpected developments cannot be ruled out. If a violation of the status quo occurs, it is difficult to say whether Israel will know if the act is intentional, and as a result, its involvement in a new round of confrontation remains a possibility.

2.5. The unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state

Inasmuch as talks with Israel are not being held and the overall situation does not inspire optimism, a growing number of people are calling

2012

for the unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state and its recognition as a full member of the UN. Several Latin American countries have recognized Palestine, and other countries are preparing to follow suit.

2013

Proponents of such a resolution include European diplomats. The essence of their position is aimed at overcoming the imbalance of the conflict. If a Palestinian state were declared and recognized as a member of the UN, Israel would be occupying a sovereign UN member state and talks would be conducted between two entities holding equal standing under international law.

2014

2016

A unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state would, of course, be followed by a wave of recognition, but it may also increase tensions in the region due to the reluctance of the international community as a whole to proffer universal acceptance. Moreover, radical groups could feel alienated by the solution and excluded from the political process.

2017

Therefore, this scenario would be likely to result in the consolidation of jihadist movements and the weakening of moderate Islamic organizations, which would be particularly dangerous for Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

2018

2019

2020

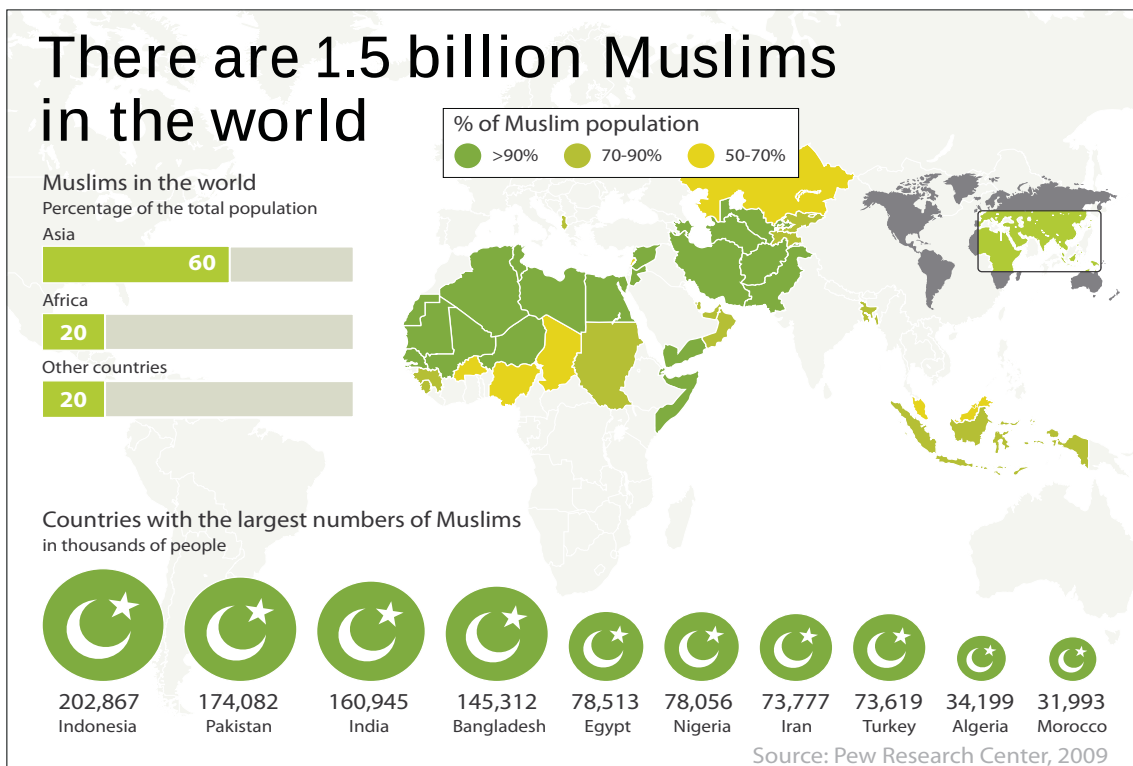
2021

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2025



Chronology of direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations

October 30 – November 1, 1991

The Madrid Peace Conference on the Middle East involving the Arab states and Israel. Palestinian participants attend as part of the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation

September 9, 1993

An exchange of letters between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) renounces terror, Israel and the PLO recognize each other

January-August, 1993

Secret Palestinian-Israeli talks in Oslo

September 28, 1995

The Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip is concluded in Washington

October 23, 1998

With U.S. input, the Wye River Memorandum is signed, regulating the handover of occupied territories to Palestinians

September 4, 1999

Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat sign a memorandum in Sharm el-Sheikh agreeing new terms for interim measures under previous agreements and plan talks on the Palestinian territories' final status

September 2, 2010

Talks between Binyamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas in Washington, followed by three more top-level meetings. Negotiations were suspended on September 26, after the Israeli prime minister refused to extend the 10-month moratorium on settlement construction

December 2008 – January 2009

Israel's Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip. Effectively puts an end to the negotiating process between Palestinians and Israelis. This pause in bilateral dialogue leads to the start of U.S.-brokered indirect contact in May 2010

November 2007

The international conference in Annapolis. In the declaration on the results of the conference, Mahmoud Abbas and Ehud Olmert reiterate their determination to fulfill their road map commitments

January 2001

Closed Palestinian-Israeli final-status talks. The parties converge over the most sophisticated solutions to the territorial issue, Jerusalem's status and the refugee issue

September 13, 1999

Official final-status talks resume

July 2000

A three-way summit at Camp David hosted by U.S. President Bill Clinton and attended by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Ended in failure: The parties fail to reach a compromise on the main issues

2.6. Stabilization on the Israeli-Syrian track

This scenario remains unlikely because, judging by the current situation, Israel's field of compromise with Syria is constantly diminishing. Without a breakthrough in relations with the Palestinians, a breakthrough in Syrian-Israeli relations is highly unlikely. No concrete diplomatic achievements have been recorded in these relations since 1974, when Henry Kissinger negotiated the Israeli-Syrian disengagement, but Israel's border with Syria has remained calmer than its border with other neighbors.

Syria used Lebanon as an ally and a field for confrontation with Israel. Soon after the Madrid Conference, then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin hinted that Israel was ready to accept Syria's demands in exchange for its own, but later opted for the Palestinian track, and it was at that moment that Israel forfeited the chance to kill two birds with one stone.

What followed was the protracted interim period of the Oslo process and the rivalry between the two tracks. After Rabin's assassination in 1995, Shimon Peres again became prime minister and tried to revive the Syrian track but lost the election. Netanyahu reaffirmed his readiness to consider the Syrian track and even attempted to move ahead, but the two sides have failed to agree on details regarding the border.

Israel and Syria have their own ideas about where their troops were deployed before the Six Day War in 1967. There were attempts to achieve a breakthrough in early 2000, but they failed, as did indirect Syrian-Israeli talks mediated by Turkey.

The current agenda is much more complicated. It is not enough to resolve the issues related to land, water, security, and bilateral political relations. Israel and the United States cannot ignore the fact that Syria maintains relations with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas and supposedly offers refuge to people they regard as terrorists.

Currently, the Syrian government is not eager to resume talks with Israel. Damascus believes that Obama's positions are becoming weaker, the situation in Israel is becoming more complicated, and Palestinian-Israeli negotiations have been deadlocked. Therefore, they conclude that Syria has no need to take an active stand on the return of the Golan Heights aside from maintaining their return as a condition for resuming negotiations.

One also must note that progress on the Israeli-Syrian track is impossible without a resolution on the Palestinian-Israeli track, inasmuch as Damascus is unwilling to abandon the Palestinians to a one-on-one conflict with the Israelis.

Iran, which has been more actively attempting to influence the Middle East peace process, organizes large deliveries of weapons – in particular, missiles – to Israel's Arab opponents. While Syria depends on Iran's assistance, it could easily discard that dependence if the United States showed a more benevolent attitude toward its inclusion in the process.

The failed attempt to blame the assassination of Rafic Hariri, the prime minister of Lebanon from 1992 to 1998, on Syrian officials convinced Damascus that similar provocations would be staged against it in the future. Only an improvement in U.S.-Syrian relations could create the conditions necessary for negotiations, and although both sides have exchanged diplomatic visits over the course of the Obama presidency, the United States still refuses to send an official ambassador to Syria.

By inducting its own pro-Arab policy, Turkey has lost its status as an honest broker, according to Western and Israeli leaders. Turkey's relations with Israel have gradually deteriorated over the last few years, with tensions culminating as Israeli marines raided a Gaza-bound aid flotilla in May 2010. Israel has apologized and offered financial compensation for its indiscretions, but Israeli-Turkish relations continue to be increasingly alienated. However, the true impasse has not been caused by individual failures on either side but by the regional strategy pursued by Prime Minister Erdogan's Justice and Development Party to strengthen Turkey's position in the Muslim world and win the support of Turkey's increasingly adherent Muslim population.

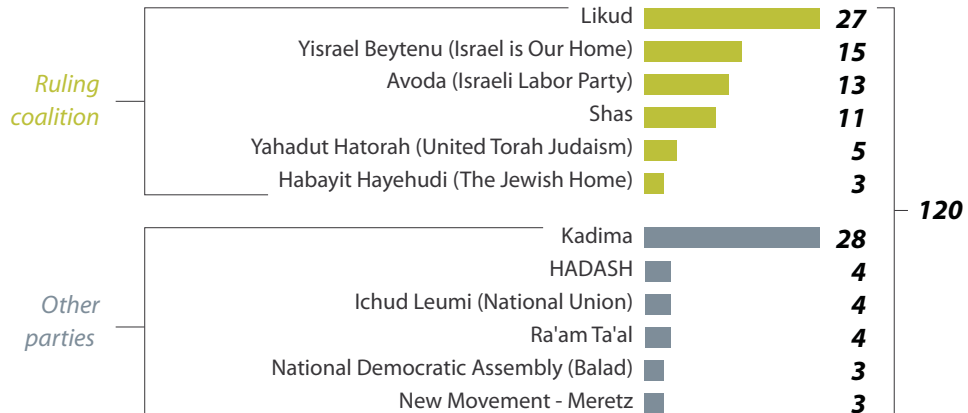
Turkey rescinded its mediation of indirect talks between Syria and Israel, which lasted from May to January 2009, when Israel attacked Gaza in December 2008 destroying industrial areas that had been developed with Turkey's assistance. As a result, it is unlikely to remain neutral. To a degree, this will influence the future of Israeli-Syrian talks and create additional obstacles for any future Syrian-Israeli peace process.



Alignment of forces in Israel's parliament and government

18th Knesset

The Knesset (parliament) is Israel's supreme legislative body. It consists of 120 members elected for a four-year term

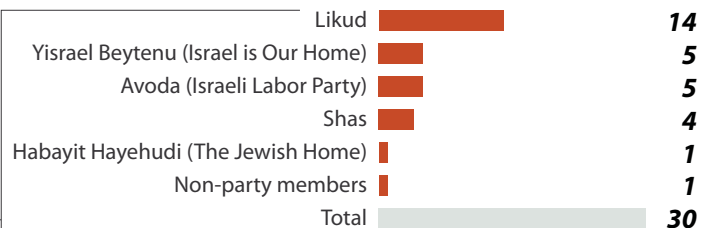


The Israeli Government



Prime Minister
**Binyamin
Netanyahu**
(Likud)

The cabinet of ministers was formed by the ruling coalition on *March 31, 2009*



3. Conclusions and recommendations

Despite a pessimistic assessment of the situation, there are some measures that could be taken to lead both sides out of deadlock, provided that they are taken without delay.

The concern of the EU and Russia over a lack of progress in the Middle East is growing. Twenty six former European politicians have called upon the EU to propose a clear and comprehensive plan for resolving the Palestinian – Israeli conflict, including a timeframe and coordinated conditions for its implementation.

The political failures of the U.S. in the Middle East do not mean that the United States should withdraw from the process. On the contrary, the in-

ternational Quartet should act together to revitalize and expand their role. Meanwhile, the conditions are ripe for such joint actions, and Russia should make use of its position to become a more active player in the process. One of the advantages Russia maintains is good relations with both Arab countries and Israel. Russian-Israeli relations reached a new level when the two nations cancelled mutual entry visas and signed their first agreement on military-technical cooperation. However, one must keep in mind that Russia's capabilities in the process remain limited.

There are no grounds for developing fundamentally new solutions. Over the years, as active and not entirely fruitless efforts have been made to resolve the Middle Eastern conflict, new plans and political mechanisms have come and gone. The current goal should be to put these plans into action with due account of the new realities at hand.

The mandate of the Quartet must necessarily be expanded, and perhaps China and India, as well as relevant regional players should be engaged in the process on a nonofficial basis. The Quartet must take advantage of the positive effects it has had since its establishment and draft a peace plan that could be offered to both sides on behalf of a broader international community: it does not need a roadmap but rather a clear and detailed plan based on mutual compromises.

Such a plan could include an exchange of small areas of land and a division of Jerusalem, based, for example, on the Clinton Plan, divide the right to repatriation from practical actions, (Palestinian refugees will return to the new Palestinian state), while stipulating measures to ensure the two states' security. Meanwhile, future possibilities should include the creation of a confederation of the independent Palestinian state and Jordan.

Until then, diplomats are forced to consider ways in which to balance the Quartet and grant it more powers, and in this regard, it would be desirable to replace the current representative of the Quartet with an influential and experienced Russian politician who holds the trust and respect of all entities who are party to the conflict.

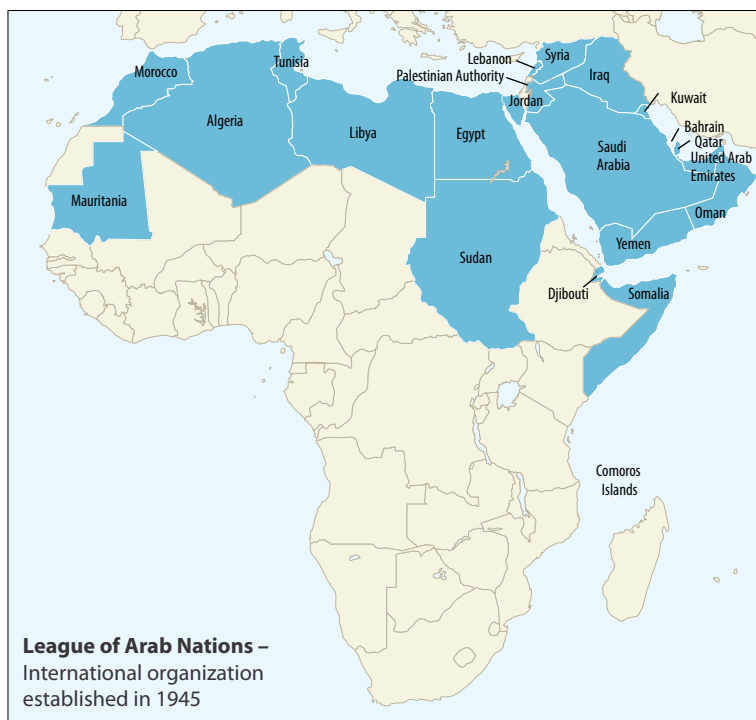




Moreover, the engagement of global players should not be limited to the Quartet. Despite internal problems and difficulties in relations with Israel, Barack Obama does not intend to retreat and so it would be advisable to better coordinate Russian-U.S. actions.

It is absolutely necessary to involve in the talks the players that are currently not involved – namely, Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas – regardless of the severity of their positions. This should be done in a way that would be acceptable to all

League of Arab Nations



Arab League member-states

1945	Egypt Iraq Jordan Lebanon Saudi Arabia Syria Yemen
1956	Sudan Libya
1958	Morocco Tunisia
1961	Kuwait
1962	Algeria
1971	Bahrain Qatar Oman United Arab Emirates
1973	Mauritania
1974	Somalia
1976	Palestinian Authority
1977	Djibouti
1993	Comoros Islands

sides. At least part of the way should be covered jointly with them. The principle that “nothing can be done until everyone is agreed” has made no progress. The idea that one must consent to that which one can accept is more credible. Thus, if progress has been made in the security and establishment of institutions of Palestinian statehood in comparison with the past, further improvement remains obstructed by the territorial division of the West Bank.

Some progress could be made if Israel turns over a considerable part of the West Bank to the Palestinians in accordance with the borders and zones delineated by the Oslo Agreement. Stability on the border with Lebanon must be preserved and further strengthened.

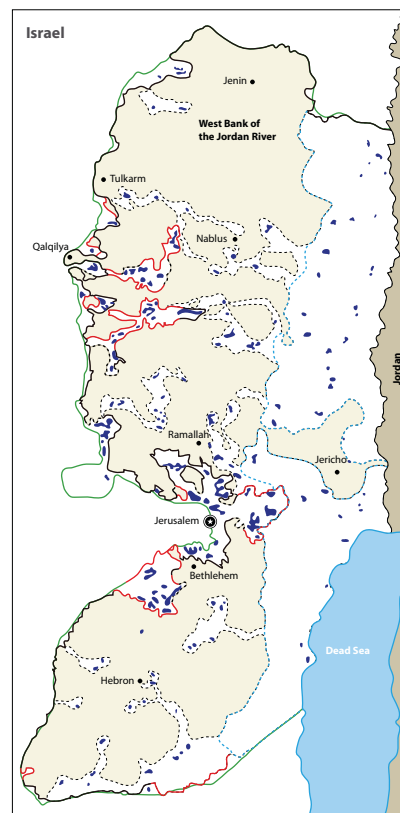
Inasmuch as bilateral talks have reached a stalemate, multilateral talks may be resumed, which were not unsuccessful at the Madrid Conference. These addressed issues of security, water supply, and economic cooperation. It is extremely important to create and develop mechanisms of regional security in a region where none existed before. In the past, the United States focused on ensuring Israel's security, while disregarding other countries' concerns. Now it is time to create a common security system for the Middle East.

Turkey and Iran could also be constructively involved in the peace process, and in order to facilitate regional dialogue, it could be worth-while to hold an international conference on multilateral issues in Moscow.

Multilateral peace talks could be held concurrently with the talks between Israelis and Palestinians if U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell makes way as intermediary. The resumption of a multilateral track could also attract attention to peaceful Arab initiatives, which is vital for key Arab players.

But above all, it is necessary to encourage humanitarian relations in the Middle East peace

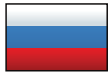
Israeli settlements



- Territories under Palestinian autonomy (54.5%)
- Territories controlled by Israeli settlers (45.5%)
- Borders of 1967 (acknowledged by the Palestinian Authority and most world countries)
- Israeli settlements
- Wall (sites constructed and under construction)
- Wall construction plan adopted by the Israeli government in 2006

Key players in the Middle East peace process

The Middle East Quartet



Russia



United States



European Union



United Nations



Arab countries



Turkey



Iran



Japan



China

process, so that it not only involves politicians and diplomats but also the people. There are extensive opportunities and initiatives for such rapprochement advanced “from below,” as well as proposals for financing the process by international institutions and non-governmental organizations. All party nations must develop cooperation at the level of civil society and cause a shift in standard attitudes in order to move beyond stereotypes. Any peace process should include an educational element to promote a culture of peace. Before politicians sit down at the negotiating table – or along with them – we should lay the political groundwork for respect between the Arab world and Israel.

Transformation in the Arab World and Russia's Interests

Moscow, June 2012

The authors of the report are:

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In the report the information from speeches made by the Russian and foreign participants at the third conference of the Middle East section of the Valdai Discussion Club that took place in Sochi on February 16–19 was used

0. Introduction

The revolutionary changes in the Arab world – massive protest movements, uprisings and civil wars – have transformed Arab societies as well as shifted the regional balance of power, having elevated the region's significance in the eyes of regional and global players, including Russia.

Russia wants a peaceful and prosperous Middle East, free of wars and foreign interference – a region where all nations are able to choose their own path. But it is clear that the painful turmoil in the region has not yet ended and that the process of transformation will continue, drawing many countries both inside and outside the region into the process.

Much has been said about the causes and characteristics of the events that have come to be known as the Arab Spring. It swept away seemingly stable regimes and weakened others. The following causes of the mass protests can be identified: stagnating authoritarian regimes; lack of civil liberties (which had become increasingly clear to the more modernized public in the light of globalization); growing income inequality between the elite and the rest of the people; systemic corruption; poverty; weak social policy; ineffective economic models; the poor development of society's productive forces and dependence on unstable but relatively accessible foreign sources of revenue. This foreign funding was used to pursue statist policies and maintain the inefficient public sector, impeding the growth of the private sector and aggravating negative effects of the economic reforms conducted in the last few years.

Too little time has passed to make broad generalizations and final conclusions. But we can look at the Arab Spring through the prism of regional and global prospects, resulting in new observations that could be of practical use to politicians.

* It was the aim of the third conference of the Middle East section of the Valdai Discussion Club that took place in Sochi on February 16–19, 2012. The current report is not a summary of discussions. However, it embraces many of the ideas and propositions of the conference participants



1. The Arab Spring and its results

From a historical perspective, the Arab Spring was not an entirely new and unexpected phenomenon of mass protest in the Arab Middle East.

The Arab world had already seen protracted and turbulent demonstrations that led to deep changes, such as the struggle against colonial dependence and rotten monarchic and comprador regimes in the pursuit of the ideals of Arab nationalism or socialism; as well as during domestic conflicts or wars with neighbors (the Iraq–Iran war) and Israel. Some countries staged massive armed revolutions for national liberation (Algeria in 1956–1962 and South Yemen in 1963–1967).

In the 1950s–1960s the region was swept up in a wave of mass movements (this period is sometimes called the Arab Cold War). The Iraq revolution in 1958 was no less surprising than the current upheavals. At the end of the Six-Day War, one of the authors of this report attended a powerful night demonstration of Egyptian youth at Tahrir Square in support of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s continued rule.

There was a new upsurge of demonstrations in the 2000s – protest marches of tribes against the governments of Kuwait and Jordan and workers’ strikes in Tunisia, Algeria and, in particular, Egypt.

Even the use of information communications to mobilize protesters is not entirely new in the Middle East. Before the Internet and television, there were mosques. The American scholar Mark Lynch compares the role of Al Jazeera with that of the Egyptian Sawt al-Arab Radio (Voice of the Arabs) during the Nasser era, which urged people to take to the streets in many Arab cities.

Clearly, none of the causes of the Arab Spring were new. However, for decades the ruling Arab regimes were able to suppress the waves of discontent, even those motivated by major issues of pan-Arab solidarity (such as the defense of national Palestinian rights). On other occasions, mass unrest was more localized.

What changed in 2011? We believe it was the accumulation of grievances – combined with a powerful new generational factor – that proved decisive. It is widely



Unrest in the Arab countries

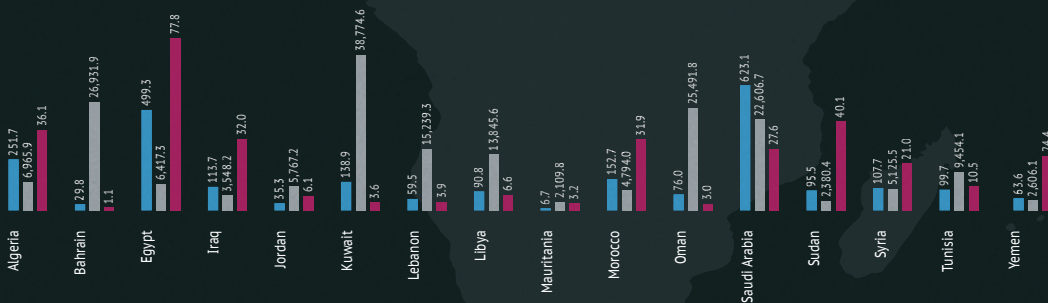
Throughout 2011 the Arab world was marked by riots and protests.

■ Countries where localized protests took place
 ■ Countries where protests took place but did not lead to regime change
 ■ Countries where the unrest led to regime change.
 ■ Countries where unrest is continuing

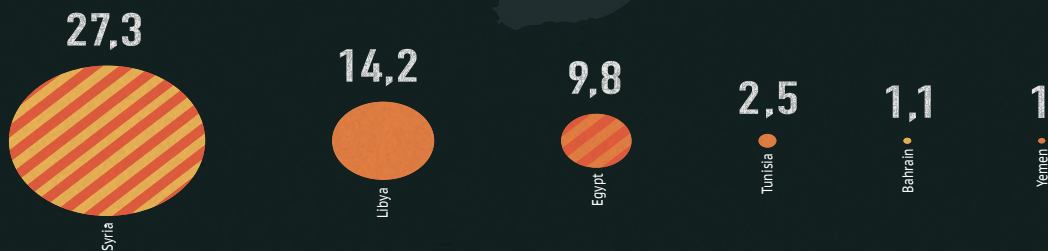


Macroeconomic indicators and the size of the population*

■ GDP, billions of dollars
 ■ GDP per capita, dollars
 ■ Population, in millions



Damage to the economy, billions of dollars**



Number of people killed in the disturbances***



* Data for 2010 provided by the IMF

** Data from the International management consultancy group Geopolitics on October 14, 2011

*** Data from various sources

known that dynamic and engaged young people no older than 35 years make up about two thirds of the region's population.

The role of the Arab street grew rapidly during the uprisings and mass protests of 2011–2012, and it will likely continue to express its will to both the new and old rulers alike. The Arab world has embraced a new pan-Arabism different from the previous one in terms of values, attitudes and goals; however, this does not mean that a trans-national consensus exists. In the past, pan-Arabism was rooted in nationalist, left-wing and socialist ideas, whereas the new pan-Arabism created by the Arab Spring proceeds from traditionalist ideas of Islamic revival, which are less liberal but still nationalistic. This “street” pan-Arabism is no longer aimed against Israel's colonialism but against authoritarian regimes at home.

The profound changes in the Arab world have transformed both the balance of power in the Middle East and the domestic political development of countries swept by the Arab Spring. Political priorities are undergoing a gradual revision, giving rise to new trends, such as the further weakening of global control over international processes and the emergence of tensions in regional alliances that had seemed stable before.

From the very start, the Arab Spring looked as a democratic challenge to entrenched presidents and prime ministers, families and clans that monopolized political power and sought to continue their dynasties, renouncing even the appearance of a republican political system, such as elections, competition among political parties, etc. In this context, it could seem like this is a universal Arab phenomenon with an emphasis on democratization. But the difficulties of transition in these countries, the emergence of Islamists as the most organized force, and the growing social rupture between religious and secular life are creating new conditions and raising serious questions. Among them are questions on the limits of democratization in the Arab world, the prospects of the new parties and organizations that emerged from the revolution and the role that the army will play in the changing political structure.

The socio-political causes of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt can be seen in other countries.

Some governments have already drawn lessons from these events and launched reforms to alleviate public discontent and ensure stability. Syria's failure to rapidly implement reforms has split society into supporters and opponents of the regime, resulting ultimately in armed confrontation. The triad of Ba'ath ideology – unity, freedom and socialism – lost its appeal for a considerable part of the public, while the Ba'ath Party's monopoly on power became an unacceptable anachronism. Moreover, the disproportionate use of force by the regime has added to the situation.

The driving forces, stated goals and results of revolutionary action in the various countries of the Arab Spring are very diverse. It is needed to avoid making any false equivalence between events in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. Libyan events were based on a tribal uprising, in Bahrain there was an uprising



of an oppressed religious group, while in the other countries one region was protesting against the concentration of power and economic resources in the hands of another, be it with or without religious context of a protest.

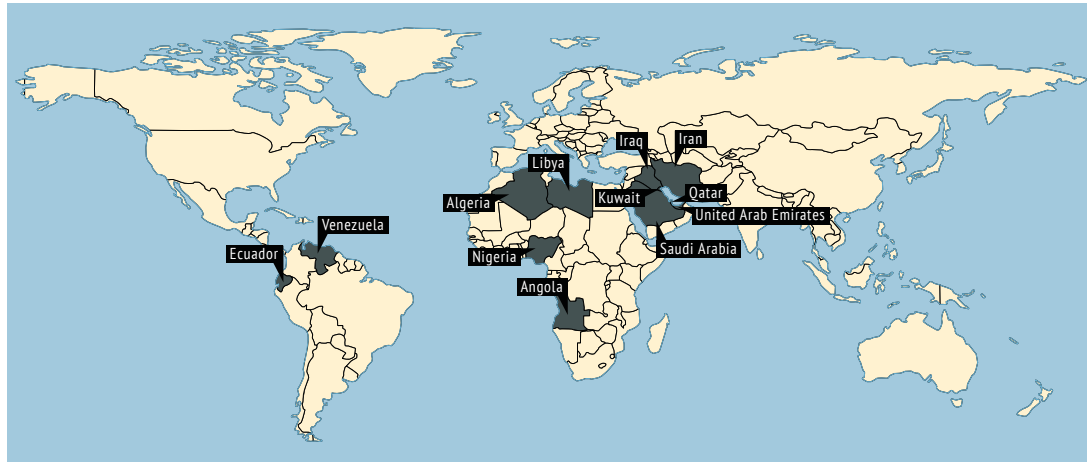
Considering the diversity of Arab countries and regimes, it would be wrong to measure them according to the same economic and social yardstick. The Arab world is represented both by capital-surplus oil-exporters and capital-poor oil importers. For example in Qatar in 2010 the average GDP per capita amounted to \$88,222 according to the IMF estimate, or \$179,000 (the highest in the world) according to the CIA estimate, whereas in Sudan it was \$2,200. The archaic regimes of the region's oil producing nations have managed to drown potential discontent in dollars. But this carrot does not work everywhere. In theory, the Gaddafi regime could have also shared its huge oil-and-gas revenues with the protesters, but in this case the organized opposition was fighting not for a share of the revenues but for the power that would give its leaders access to all economic and political resources.

Moreover, the social movements in the Arab world were developing against the background of the global economic crisis, which greatly impacted the living standards of the majority, despite the efforts of the authorities to subsidize the poorest of their citizens. Educated jobless young people were in the worst position. Being the most dynamic and modern segment of society, the youth became the main driving force and the main source of the ideology behind the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. Rather than the traditional poorest citizens, who got used to their status and lost their ability to formulate revolutionary goals, it was the educated class that took charge of the political scene in the most advanced Arab countries, leading divergent social and cultural groups both at home and in the near abroad.

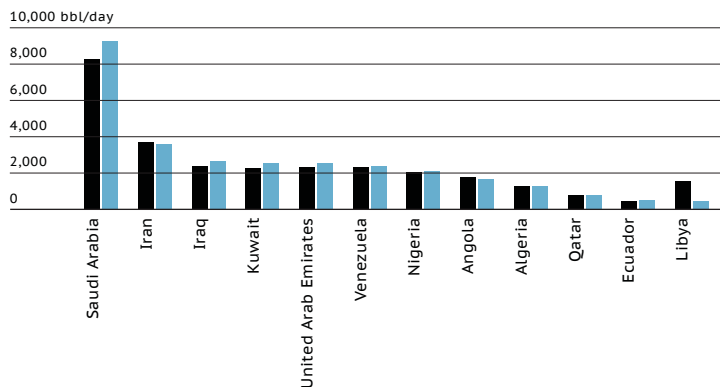
Almost all countries in the region that were affected by upheavals are undergoing a painful transition from traditional, authoritarian political systems to new methods of governance that are not fully elaborated. They are rethinking former secular and religious values to forge a national identity in a changing world.

2010-2011 OPEC Oil Production

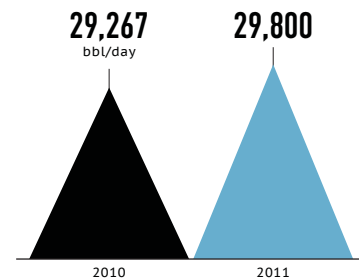
Changes in daily oil production by the cartel members



Daily crude oil production by OPEC members



Daily crude oil production (by all OPEC members)



OPEC monthly report, February 2012

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2. Political Islam and its prospects

Islamist parties have come to power in many Arab countries as a result of the Arab Spring. They have emerged after being forced underground by the dictators that are now overthrown. Political Islam has become one of the most influential forces in the region. Considering the outcomes, the Arab Spring could also be called the Great Islamic Uprising or even the Great Islamist Revolution. Political Islam has never scored such major victories in the Arab world (although there was the Shia Islam revolution in Iran in 1979, and the rise of the Sunni Taliban in Afghanistan). More importantly, the Islamist parties came to power after free and fair elections that came as a result of the popular protests which the Islamists

did not organize and they even were not the main participants. Having won parliamentary majorities, Islamists are now taking executive power in their hands, and their rule is much more legitimate than that of the previous regimes that were installed by military coups.

The image of the Islamist leaders who were persecuted by the widely hated regimes obviously contributed to this decisive political victory. It was only recently when the Islamists were discussing whether they should play by the rules created by Western democracies, today now even the Salafis have started playing by them. The Salafi party in Egypt, Al-Nour (The Light), received almost a quarter of the vote in the parliamentary elections. Long-standing Islamic movements in Egypt formed political parties in line with the same standards that are accepted practically throughout the world. The Muslim Brotherhood established the Freedom and Justice Party, while the Salafis formed Al-Nour. This showed that they were willing to accept modern political norms. Islamist parties in Tunisia (Al-Nahda or the Revival), Morocco, Algeria, Jordan and other Arab countries have been using parliamentary methods quite skillfully in their political struggle since long ago. However, the leaders of even such a moderate and enlightened party as Al-Nahda are showing signs of sympathy for establishing a caliphate.

It is still unclear how far the victors are ready to go in implementing the ideals of democracy. Is it possible to reconcile democratic values and norms with the traditionally conservative and near-extremist Islamist ideology? Muslim Brotherhood General Guide Muhammad Badi said that his movement favors freedom and democracy but in an Islamic interpretation, and that “democracy cannot allow what is banned or ban what is allowed”. No wonder many experts believe that the attitude of Islamists to women and religious or national minorities will illustrate the true extent of their commitment to democratic values. Representatives of women’s organizations in the Arab Spring countries are already complaining about discrimination. Some women feel like they are victims of the change. Christians also worry about their future. The public is alarmed over the attempts by Salafi groups to seize control



of universities and instances of physical assault against professors and students who are deemed too liberal, as happened in Tunisia. Many progressive urban residents fear that the few but active Salafis are inspired not by Turkey's progressive Justice and Development Party but by the Saudi–Wahhabi political model or even the ossified Taliban movement.

Finally, the attitude of Islamic forces to secularism, which they have always considered an “ideological enemy,” remains the most complicated issue. Relations between the dominant Islamists in the government and the army, which has been a major player in Egypt since 1952, are a pressing problem for the country. Moreover, having accepted the peace treaty with Israel, the Islamists of Egypt will not find it easy to formulate a policy towards Tel Aviv.

The historic disagreements between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis, which are stirred up by outside players, also present a serious challenge for the Islamists in general. The Saudis, for one, do not conceal their good will towards the Salafis and may well be considered their patron, whereas Qatar favors the Muslim Brotherhood. The serious social differences between the electoral bases of the two movements in Egypt play a key role in this issue. In the elections the Salafis were backed by the poorest segment of society, whereas the Muslim Brotherhood relied on the urban bourgeoisie, and their economic platform was more liberal than conservative. Hence, the liberal forces are bound to become a natural ally of moderate Islamists, who, in turn, will lose their image of a strictly religious party. However, a potential coalition between the two Islamic groups should not be ruled out. Some analysts even think that the Muslim Brotherhood (or affiliated groups) is even using Salafis to test public support for their ideas.

Islamist Jihad, including Islamic Maghreb's Al-Qaeda, is the third Islamist force – an outside player that has gained strength in North Africa. It hopes to exploit the victory of moderate Islamic movements to promote its own interests. Its representatives may try to infiltrate the Islamist political bloc that is shaping in Algeria and is likely to challenge the current regime in the near future.



Libya faces even more challenges than Tunisia and Egypt. During the civil war, the differences between Libya's various regions and tribes turned into openly hostile relations and today the Libyians have to establish a government apparatus virtually from scratch. Political Islam is strong in Yemen, where the Al-Islah Party hopes to come to power. But any government in Yemen will have to counter Jihadist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is entrenched in some regions of Yemen.

During 2011 and the first four months of 2012, the Islamist organizations have been actively opposing the ruling regime in Syria, even resorting to armed force. Both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis are trying to lead the scattered groups of the Syrian opposition, including the Free Syrian Army, which does not have a unified command structure but rather brings together various independent militia units under its auspices.

There are two contradicting points of view on Islamist political organizations among the international expert community. Some believe that moderate Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia are similar to Europe's Christian-Democratic parties and will therefore grow increasingly pragmatic and less religious. Their opponents think that these Islamist parties are increasingly hegemonic and dogmatic and that the only transformation they can undergo is through radicalization and renunciation of the Western political model and values. Both views seem extreme, but prove the wide range of opinions on the matter.

The Islamic political organizations of the Middle East are very different from each other. Their character is largely determined by the role of Islam in each society, which in turn is defined by the following factors:

- Degree of religiosity;
- Accepted religious practices, many of which incorporate local pre-Islamic traditions;
- The character of a society's social, cultural and political development (depending, in part, on whether it has implemented secular projects);
- The share of non-Muslims, etc.



The economic damage wrought by the Arab Spring is among the most serious challenges to the victors in Egypt and Tunisia. Economic recovery and development are complicated by the too-high expectations of people who are hoping for the rapid improvement of living standards after the overthrow of corrupt dictators. Clearly, financial aid of the Arabian Peninsula states is not enough for them. They will have to appeal to the West, which will provide aid but on certain terms. It will be success in resolving socio-economic issues that will show how effective the new governments are.

Moreover, the synthesis of religious and ethnic factors plays a major role in the evolution of different societies beyond the Muslim world. Some analysts even predict the rise of a global conflict between religious and secular societies. Needless to say, these processes affect Russia as a multi-religious and multi-ethnic state. Religion is interfering with politics in various ways and is being used as a means of mobilization and self-identification.

While the Islamists have gained power, this does not mean that they have scored an absolute victory or that the revolutions in these countries have succeeded. Only an entirely new project of political and socio-economic development can help them achieve these goals, and it is the elaboration of this project that is the key problem today.

They will have to do this while the political systems and, probably, the Islamist parties themselves are still changing. Now the Islamists have to strike a balance between two ideological and political extremes – strict adherence to scripture without any account of socio-political realities (the Orthodox Salafi position), or the complete renunciation of scripture in favor of reality (the position of secular democrats that could potentially side with moderate Islamists).

Many politicians believe the Arab Spring has discredited violence as a routine means of achieving political ends in the majority of Arab countries. The well-known Palestinian figure Ahmed Qurei argues that terrorism as a way to achieve political goals is becoming obsolete in a result of the Arab Spring. His statement



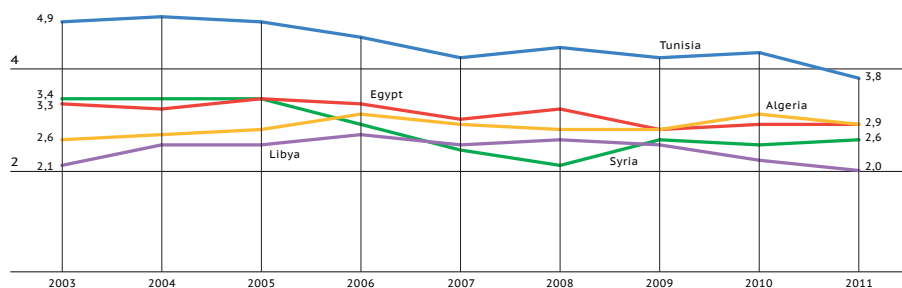
Corruption Perceptions Index for some Arab countries

The changing indexes and ratings of the Arab Spring countries

The dynamics of changing national indices

The index reflects the perceived level of corruption in the public sector of the country on a 10-point scale. Highest level of corruption: 0 points. No corruption: 10 points

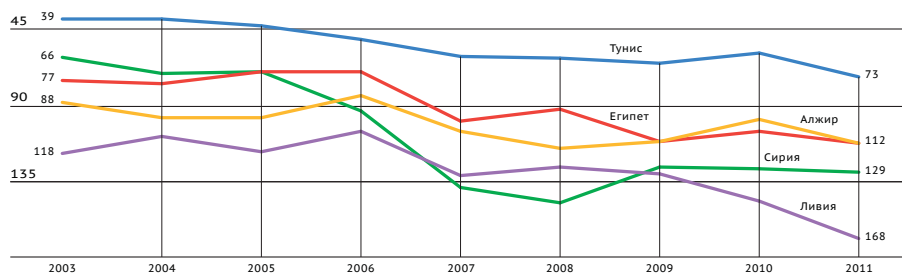
Algeria ● Egypt ● Libya ● Syria ● Tunisia
Source: Transparency International



The dynamics of ratings changes per country

The lower the rating, the higher the level of corruption in the country

Algeria ● Egypt ● Libya ● Syria ● Tunisia
Source: Transparency International



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looks very dubious given all the spilled blood in the region, but it is significant that Qurei speaks about a new “Islamic youth alternative” to the Palestine resistance movement. This new phenomenon is “characterized by moderate and pragmatic attitudes.”

In the wake of the experience of Hamas in the 2000s, the moderate Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia seem to realize that a radical approach leads to severed ties with the West and a lack of funding. Thus the moderates are announcing that they intend to adhere to democratic norms. At the same time, being more legitimate than their predecessors, there are also more attentive to public opinion which is making their position unstable and causing conflicts within their organizations. Their lead-

ers are ready for dialogue with the West, but their members at the grassroots level want to see authentic political regimes.

The first steps of the new authorities of Tunisia and Egypt have shown their readiness for compromise, which bolsters their political positions, and their reluctance to tackle socio-economic problems entirely on their own. Such attitudes, combined with a general lack of experience in government, are creating the conditions for coalitions.

Indicatively, the Arab world is already talking about the Egyptian model that is combining Islamic values as interpreted by their bearers as well as democratic ideas. Much in Egypt and Tunisia will depend on the nature of their new constitutions. In Egypt much will also depend on whether it becomes a parliamentary republic or the president will continue to play the dominant role.

Although there are still serious division between the Islamists and secular forces with respect to values like tolerance, the universal nature of science and knowledge, individual freedom and human rights, they seem to be ready to come to terms on a broad range of issues concerning the political system and democratic scenarios.

This openness may become the foundation of the cooperation between the two camps in Tunisia and Egypt. However, it would be premature to expect anything similar in Libya. As for Syria, if the opposition overthrows the regime with foreign support, and Islamists (including Salafis) come to power, it is quite possible that they may massacre their opponents out of revenge.

3. The role of the external forces

The rapid changes that have rocked the Arab world pose several questions. The first is what the correlation of external and internal factors in the organization and support of the protest movements was, and the second is in what direction the Arab world will move in the future? Some trends are already becoming apparent.



Level of Freedom and Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa

Status *

2011

Countries:
Not freePartially
free

Free

2010

Countries:
Not freePartially
free

Free

2009

Countries:
Not freePartially
free

Free

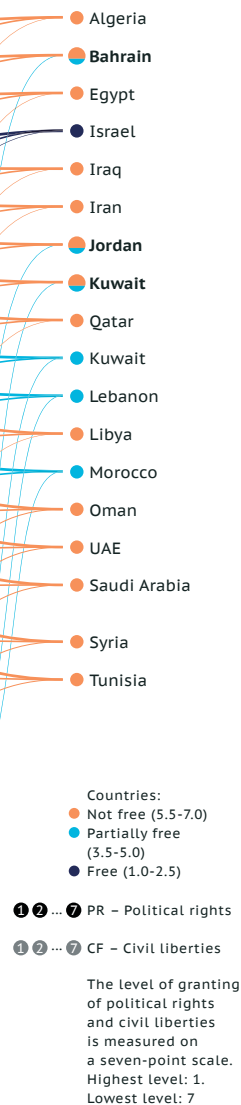
* Status – General assessment of the situation in the country qualitative and quantitative aspects

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Downward trends / upward trends

2009	2010	2011
Iran	Iran	Bahrain
6 ↓	6 ↓	5.5 ↓
Bahrain	Bahrain	Egypt
5 ↓	5 ↓	5.5 ↓
Iraq	Iraq	Iran
6 ↑	6 ↓	6 ↓

Source: Freedom House, Freedom in the World Reports 2009–2011



The unexpected democratic bent of the mass movements in the Arab Spring – so unusual for traditional societies – compelled some analysts to emphasize the role of external forces that might have an interest in seeing systemic changes in the region. The Arab Spring was practically put on par with the “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space. These assumptions were followed by conclusions about the consolidation of unilateral actions by shortterm coalitions or individual nations that have usurped the right to confer legitimacy on particular regimes and use public opinion and protest control technologies.

Neither Tunisia nor Egypt went down the path of a color revolution. The powerful scope of the protest movements was determined by a whole set of domestic factors, the accumulation of which demanded a transformation of ossified conservative societies and systems. But as events unfolded in the Arab countries, foreign interference began to play a larger role far from stabilizing.

The large-scale military confrontation between the opposition and the regimes in Libya and Syria focused public attention on the potentials, limits and legitimacy of foreign interference, including its justification by the humanitarian goal of protecting civilians. Thus, a question posed by Moscow posed arises: Will the fundamental norms of international law, such as sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries, continue to be valid after Kosovo, Iraq and Libya or are the rules of conduct among states changing de facto?

The events in Libya showed Russia that the military force is moving to the fore and that the West still leans towards interventionism. It is important to analyze these events objectively, especially in view of subsequent developments in Syria, which could repeat the Libyan scenario. Actions to establish a no-fly zone in Libya, based on a broad interpretation of the UN Security Council resolution 1973, evolved into a NATO military operation to overthrow the government of a member of the international community. It was an open interference in a domestic conflict on behalf of one of the sides, so as to ensure the victory of the opposition forces. The events that followed Muammar Gaddafi’s downfall showed that the victory of the opposition did not help stabilize Libya, much less realize its democratic slogans. To the contrary, the seizure of power by the new forces resulted in largescale reprisals, the exacerbation of tribal tensions and the rise of separatism. Libya’s territorial integrity was called into question. And, finally, the brutal murder of Gaddafi by a group of rebels with the tacit consent if not the complicity of European troops in no way corresponded to the opposition’s declared ideals of democracy, freedom and justice. The overthrow of the regime with the help of outside powers led to the proliferation of weapons in neighboring states, increased terrorist activity in the Sahel countries, and provoked a riot among Islamists and Tuareg tribes in Mali.

The decision to enforce a no-fly zone was formally a legitimate action based on a UN Security Council’s resolution and precedent, in particular with respect to Iraq. But resolution 1973 contained very loose definitions, allowing

for broad interpretation. This is how a legal case for regime change by force with UN participation was made, and the UN, with its considerable peacekeeping experience, was driven into legitimizing something quite different – democracy by force.

The Libyan crisis largely determined Russia's tough stance during the discussion and voting on a resolution on Syria. Some UN members clearly wanted to essentially replicate the Libyan playbook: declare the ruling "dictatorial" regime illegal; recognize the opposition as the nation's legal government; secure a UN mandate to intervene under the pretext of ending violence perpetrated by the state authorities; and establish military bridgeheads in the form of "buffer zones" or "humanitarian corridors."

The issue of legally depriving governments of their international legitimacy was put on a practical plane. It was enough for some states to find them objectionable. These internationally recognized governments were accused of suppressing civil freedoms, using disproportionate force against the rebels attempting to overthrow them, and violating human rights or standards of humanitarian law. But was it legal to take such steps against them? All these important and not purely legal questions moved to the fore under the impact of the crises in Libya and Syria.

As a result of the Arab Spring, states in the region have become much more active. In the new conditions of weaker control over global processes, some countries in the Middle East and regional organizations (the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC) opted for a more independent policy to meet their own interests, which do not always coincide with those of outside actors.

The GCC has turned into a military-political bloc directed against Iran, on the one hand, and designed to protect the Gulf monarchies against real and potential domestic threats, on the other. Having overcome the shock of the Arab Spring, the key countries of the bloc – Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – helped to suppress the Shia uprising in Bahrain and enthusiastically supported the Sunni opposition to the regime of Bashar Al-Assad in Syria. The Gulf countries also exerted decisive influence on the Arab League, leading





the organization to support regime change in a member country for the first time in history.

The media is strongly encouraging moves to intervene by manipulating information or even distorting it in the interests of some groups of states. Reports that favor the opposition are being published almost exclusively by the Western electronic media and press, including the Internet and social networks. Unlike in the past, almost all events in the region instantly become public knowledge. Even during this initial stage of the turbulent changes, it is clear that we are witnessing not just the free embrace of democracy by the Arab countries but also attempts by Russia's Western partners to reorder the entire Arab world.

Events in Syria force us to consider all the abovementioned factors in this complicated political landscape, including the Sunni-Shia component. The objective position of Russia and China, with the focus on mediation and national dialogue, gave the regime a chance to implement reforms, freezing out those who demanded its immediate overthrow under the threat of armed intervention. Moscow's support for UN Special Envoy Kofi Annan's peace plan showed that it approached the issue without bias, proceeding from the principle of respect for sovereignty and a desire to prevent a domestic armed conflict from escalating into a full regional war with a sectarian dimension. In effect, Russia secured the adoption of a balanced new resolution on Annan's plan that did not demand Al-Assad's resignation.

Regrettably, an external interference in the domestic conflict in Syria had already been taking place: commandos were sent into Syria from abroad; the opposition received help with training militia units, primarily the Free Syrian Army; and these units were supplied with arms and ammunition. In such conditions, hostilities are bound to spread, with heavy losses and destruction on both sides. The development of situation in Syria took a very negative turn. The Ba'ath Party, which had held a monopoly on power in a country where 40% of people are minorities, started losing ground. Exhausted by long-term hostilities and high tensions in cities, the army and security forces failed to restore order quickly enough.



As a result, the country has reached a stalemate; the regime is not strong enough to suppress the opposition, which has fairly significant level of foreign support, but without direct foreign intervention the opposition is unable to seize power.

A number of Arab experts did not support the Russian-backed concept of a national dialogue between the Syrian authorities and the opposition, which is possible if the latter disassociates itself from radicals and terrorists. Some of them even believe that there is no more chance for a peaceful resolution. This negative attitude, combined with the demand of Al-Assad's resignation as a precondition for a negotiated settlement, has promoted criticism from many Russian and foreign experts. They cite numerous acts of violence carried out by the opposition, its disunity, continued support for Al-Assad among large segments of society, including minorities, and the absence of a plan of action by the opposition.

What the Syrian opposition will do if it comes to power remains an open question. None of its various groups has explained what it intends to do with all those who served the regime, with the minorities and the large number of government employees, the bulk of which belong to the ruling party. Moreover, the opposition is not united (even territorially), and includes not only moderate secular forces but also radicals from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, and even Al-Qaeda, according to some experts. One of the major problems is that the Syrian opposition does not have a strategy of national reconciliation or a recovery program for their weakened country. Huge funds are needed to pay salaries and support infrastructure. Secular opposition members believe that a transitional government will have to make peace with Israel, even if it comes to negotiating over the Golan Heights, in order to focus on domestic issues. However, nobody can predict what the religious forces will do – they are hoping to come to power if the al-Assad regime is defeated.

For the time being, the regime is still strong enough to resist the pressure. Its overthrow is fraught with even worse bloodshed and a civil war that could spill over into neighboring countries and turn into an extremely dangerous and protracted Sunni-Shia conflict.



4. Regional players and the Arab Spring

How have three of the region's main powers – Turkey, Israel and Iran – fared in the Arab Spring?

Israeli analysts believe that initially the Arab Spring seemed like the latest episode in the ongoing conflict between moderate pro-Western forces and radicals in the Middle East, even though the protesters in Egypt and Tunisia demanded political change and democratization. The downfall of Hosni Mubarak was seen as a boon to the Islamists, both moderate and radical, and it threatened to destabilize other regimes (such as Jordan) that were within the U.S. sphere of influence and were at peace with Israel. The growing strength of the Arab street, which can be easily pitted against Israel and the United States, may have complicated Israel's relations with both Egypt and Jordan. Israel had apprehensions that after the revolutions the Arab states might eventually follow in Iran's footsteps. The reality turned out to be more ambiguous. Instability caused a vacuum and the inability of governments to control events – be it on the Sinai, in Syrian cities or elsewhere – did not bode well for Israel.





The incomplete transformation in the Middle East suggests that Tunisia, for one, may be pulled out of the usual Western environment and pressed into accepting values that are not shared by the majority of its people. Israeli experts believe that modernization has been reversed in many respects. While the Arab world may become more democratic and modernized, it could also become much more conservative. The Israeli experts maintain that the paternalism that predominates in society in the region is at odds with democracy. Even if the revolutions are successful, they have not yet altered the traditional social relations in the region.

The weakening of the Syrian regime and its potential downfall may prove to be less painful for Israel than has been assumed before. Indeed, the Golan Heights have been calm in recent years. However, the Syrian regime, which depends on Iran, became a link between Tehran and Hezbollah, and also Hamas. Having found itself in the same boat with “problem regimes,” Hamas has to look for new patrons that will likely have to be more pragmatic and moderate. Moreover, secular elements in the Syrian opposition are already proclaiming their interest in Israeli support so that when they come to power they can settle the conflict and concentrate on building a new state. Indicatively, Israel voted together with the Arab League on Syria at the UN General Assembly session last February for the first time in history.

Another important outcome of the Arab Spring is that it has strengthened two nonArab Mid-Eastern states – Turkey and Iran. The interests of these two players clash in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and other regional hot spots. This long-term trend is determined not only by the political and economic decline of the Arab countries but also by the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and their future pullout from Afghanistan, which opens additional opportunities for these two states.

Objective factors, such as economic growth and political stabilization, are feeding the foreign policy ambitions of Iran and Turkey. GDP is growing at an average rate of 5% in Iran. Differences among the ruling elite have been contained, while the constitutional redistribution of power is making the regime stronger. Domestic political instability along the lines of the Arab Spring is unlikely because, unlike Arab states,

power in Iran is controlled not by individual clans and families but by religious leaders whose power relies on pluralistic, essentially democratic institutions. Tensions do not extend beyond disagreements among the religious leaders themselves, and therefore protest movements are not directed at creating a secular regime.

Turkey's domestic situation has been marked by positive trends. The Justice and Development Party (JDP) easily overcame the crisis by implementing successful reforms. Although the party is still pursuing populist economic policies, it has made them more targeted and substantially enhanced Turkey's appeal for foreign investors.

Today, the Turkish model looks much more acceptable to the Arab world than the Iranian one, but this does not mean that Arab countries will follow the Turkish path. Turkey has fueled unreasonable expectations throughout the region, which have become even higher in light of recent events, but its model is interpreted in various ways. On the one hand, Turkey has a wealth of experience that Arabs lack. A multi-party political system has operated in Turkey for a long time. Moreover, as NATO's southern flank, Turkey has important relations with the European Union, the United States and Israel. It is much more integrated in the world than the Arab states where Islamists have been elected to parliament.

On the other hand, Turkey's claims to a special role in the region and the emergence of neoOttoman attitudes toward Arab states may repel Arabs from adopting the Turkish model.

Iran is also trying to earn dividends in the Arab world or, at least, to neutralize any negative developments. The transformation in the Arab world has altered the balance of power in the region. Tehran believes that the new governments are free from their countries' past commitments and, therefore, nothing can prevent Iran from establishing friendly relations with them. It can only lose if Al-Assad steps down in Syria, as the Alawi regime is Iran's only Arab ally. But, all things considered, it appears his regime can hold on to power for a considerable time. Even if it does not, the new leaders will not be able to turn their backs on Syria's commitments





on the Palestinian issue and will probably even adopt a more radical approach. Tehran believes they will have to rely on Iran as the only consistent Palestinian supporter in the region.

This looks logical in theory, but in reality Iran finds itself without partners. Importantly, when the Islamic revolution took place in Iran, few in the world knew about political Islam. Now it is one of the most urgent international topics, albeit in its Sunni incarnation. However, to some extent, this is making Iran's experience more appealing, mostly to Shias.

By and large, all regional players are in a contradictory position. A tactical victory may turn into defeat in the long run and vice versa. The Saudis, for one, have earned political dividends in the region but may face difficulties because of the competition between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis.

Importantly, Al-Qaeda has lost despite the rise of the Islamists. Its ideology has been rejected. Yet, persistent instability in the Middle East may open up new opportunities.

5. Results for Russia, forecasts and recommendations

Hardly anyone would dare to predict even short-term developments in the Arab world and the wider Middle East. This period of instability is likely to drag out. Protests may engulf other countries, but retreats cannot be ruled out, either – for instance, if the army is brought in.

The new governments (Islamic or secular) borne of the Arab Spring may try to monopolize power, curtail democratic freedoms and violate human rights. They may return to past methods of rule if they feel that their power is threatened by unjustified expectations and broken promises. The Islamic governments are hardly ca-



pable of forming a union based on Caliphate principles as well as secular nationalistic regimes never could unite despite their declared commitment to the ideals of Arab unity. Most likely, relations between them will be fraught with rivalry and competition. Under the circumstances, a clash between two development models – Turkish and Saudi–Wahhabi – may become increasingly likely as a result of the growing struggle between moderate and Salafi Islamists in the countries where political Islam has carried the day.

Russia has always enjoyed close political, economic and spiritual ties with Arab states. Unlike many Western countries, Russia has never been a colonial power in the Arab world, and it won respect in the region by supporting national liberation movements. In the postSoviet period, Muslims in Russia developed spiritual ties with Muslims in the Middle East, while the Christian shrines in the region have great significance for all Orthodox believers.

From 1990 to 2000, the Middle East was not among Russia's priorities, as the country was occupied with its own transformation. In the past decade Russia invested all of its political capital and influence in the Arab world in recovering positions that were partially lost. This time Moscow proceeded from purely pragmatic considerations rather than ideology. Its Middle East policy was aimed at achieving economic gains for the state and Russian companies, ensuring regional security and developing spiritual ties between both Muslims and Orthodox Christians of Russia and the Middle East.

The very paradigm of Russian-Arab relations has changed. They have become more equal and are developing in many directions. Russia continued to intensify ties with traditionally friendly Arab regimes (Egypt, Algeria, Syria and Iraq) and initiated active contacts with new partners in the Persian Gulf, eventually upgrading them to the strategic level.

The Russian and U.S. approaches to the practical aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process began to align, leading to constructive cooperation within the framework of the Middle East Quartet, with Washington recognized as the leading mediator.



Russian diplomats acted in the same vein during the Libyan crisis. Russian decision to abstain during the vote for UN Security Council resolution 1973 showed that it was more important for Moscow to support global policy and preserve the UN's reputation and role in the world than to pursue benefits from bilateral cooperation. However, the abuse of the UN mandate by the West as a cover-up to achieve principally different goals and Russia's subsequent decision to block attempts realize the same scenario in Syria became serious irritants in relations between Moscow and its leading Western partners and a group of Arab states that put intervention on the international agenda. At the same time, Russia prevented backsliding toward confrontation and eventually made its motives heard by the other members of the world community.

The current difficulties are likely to pass. The experience of Iraq, with which Russia is gradually restoring political and economic relations, shows that it is possible to make up for missed opportunities with time. Russia has taken a balanced approach toward the Syrian crisis despite unprecedented pressure from the West and such politically motivated Arab states as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This approach has made it a key player to be reckoned with. At the same time, Russia has a political contingency plan in the event of Al-Assad's downfall, although we would prefer to see power sharing via peaceful reforms. The anti-Assad coalition is also experiencing considerable difficulties because of the conflicting interests of Western states and the masterminds of international interference, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which are pursuing their narrow religious and political interests in the struggle for regional leadership and survival in the wave of the Arab Spring.

Under the given circumstances it is important for Russia to stick to its approach with due regard for the de facto internationalization of domestic conflicts in the countries affected by the Arab Spring. This issue has two aspects – a global one that deals with the changing conception of international relations, and a regional one.

In the global aspect, it is important to prevent relations with the West from being overloaded with complications over the Arab Spring. After all, there was no se-

rious discrepancy in attitudes to democratic change before the Libyan crisis, with the exception of attempts to draw inappropriate analogies with the color revolutions in the post-Soviet space. The variety of global issues that the Arab Spring has revealed (the use of charter standards of international conduct in the event of domestic conflicts) may well be reflected in the agenda of multilateral debates in the United Nations. External interference is more of a threat to small states than to Russia.

For all the disagreements with the West, we also have points of contact that we should use both in practical diplomacy and information policy: integration of the growing number of Muslims into Europe; efforts to combat the persistent threat of international terrorism; cooperation on the Palestinian–Israeli peace process and the protection of Christians in the Holy Land; the joint search for adequate political and diplomatic approaches to the rise of the Islamists on the Arab political scene.

For all of their emphatically negative attitudes, Russia's Arab partners remain pragmatic when it comes to opportunities for economic, financial or political gain. Therefore, Russia will be able to make up in the near future for the current decline in relations with some Arab states over the conflicts in Libya and Syria. The main thing is for Russia and its business community to have enough foreign economic interests, export and investment resources to attract the countries of this region. This is now the most important task, considering the similarities between Russia and this group of Arab states. Their economies rely on raw materials and they are actively pursuing diversification.

The Arab-Israeli peace process remains relevant in the light of new challenges and risks and the rise of tensions in some areas. It is important to note that the Palestinian issue will remain crucial for Arab identity regardless of any geopolitical changes in the Middle East. Iran is likely to formulate a strategy rooted in anti-Israeli sentiment in a bid to neutralize its losses from the abrupt changes in the Arab world. All kinds of extremist Islamic forces will try to consolidate their position in the region during the hiatus in the Quartet's mediation efforts caused





by the presidential election campaign in the United States and the possibility of a change of the U.S. administration.

An important task for Russia is to build relations with Islamist organizations that have come to power in Arab countries, or are poised to do so. On the one hand, Russia should pursue cooperation with the new Arab rulers proceeding from its positive experience of contacts with Islamist organizations and governments in the past. This task will be facilitated by Russia's less euphoric assessments of democratic changes on a Muslim-Arab foundation. These assessments rely on the need to consider national historical traditions and religious features rather than give priority to liberal values.

On the other hand, Russia should be vigilant about stronger Islamists, particularly Salafis, attempting to spread their influence to Russia's neighbors and allies in Central Asia and its Muslim regions. If Moscow succeeds in encouraging Islamists toward moderate attitudes and modernization – either by developing mutually beneficial ties with them or helping them overcome economic difficulties – Russia will find it easier to cope with the problems in its own Muslim regions.



Islam in politics: ideology or pragmatism?

Moscow, August 2013

This report is based on speeches and discussions of the International Valdai Club's Middle East Dialogue conference, held in Marrakesh, Morocco, on May 14–15, 2013. The event was attended by high-profile politicians from the Middle East and North Africa, including leaders of Islamist movements, as well as prominent experts, analysts and journalists from Russia and around the world.

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1. Introduction

The turbulent events of the Arab Awakening in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011–2012 have unleashed significant socio-political transformations in the region, ranging from the downfall of decades-old autocratic regimes and the rise of new political elites, to bloody, protracted conflicts involving ethno-religious and political forces. While the Arab Awakening has affected different countries in different ways, they all have one feature in common – the emergence of predominately Sunni Islamist parties and movements in the political arena, who have since taken power in Tunisia and Egypt.

The situation in the region is still extremely chaotic and volatile. It is only natural therefore that politicians and experts hold divergent views on the causes of these sweeping changes in the region, as well as on the current state and future prospects of the countries involved. Many believe that the transformation of the Arab world will be a painful process that could last for years if not decades. Others think that the peak has already passed or will pass in a year or so, and that the process has entered a new, less turbulent and radical phase.

There are also differing opinions on the role and place of Islamists in these countries that have been rocked by revolution, rebellion and the overthrow of old regimes. Some analysts believe that Islam will remain an integral part of the process for the foreseeable future. In other words, the Islamists are committed to remaining in power for the long term, and no other force will be capable of mounting a serious challenge in the near future. The population has clearly expressed its confidence in the Islamists, and this trust will not be exhausted quickly. Others think that the Islamists' days in power are numbered – that they are incapable of solving the intractable, primarily socioeconomic problems facing their countries and cannot possibly live up to the great hopes invested in them by the mass protest movements that swept them to power.





It is common knowledge that young people have been the main force behind the protest movements, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt. They demanded the departure of the former leaders and the elites that formed their support base from politics; greater public participation in political life; respect for human dignity, human rights and justice; an end to corruption; eradication of unemployment and social inequality; and better living standards. Islamists joined the protest movements only in the final stages. Some Arab politicians even believe that Islamists stole the victory from the insurgent youth // *Former Egyptian Foreign Minister and former Secretary of the Arab League Amr Moussa has expressed this view in speeches. Prominent Indian analyst and participant in the Middle East Dialogue, Kumaraswamy Polur Raman, believes that the Islamists' contribution to the overthrow of dictators was minimal and may be disputed altogether, though their electoral victory cannot be denied* //. Still others hold that the Islamists engineered the revolutions by exploiting the discontent of the youth and using mosques, not the Internet, to mobilize the people // *Michael Scheuer, a prominent American analyst and former high-ranking CIA official has said in numerous interviews that highly educated, pro-Western young people constitute an insignificant part of the Egyptian population and, as such, could not play a major role in shaping the future of their country* //.

2. Political Islam in Countries of the Arab Awakening: Between Society and the State

Islamism and Secularism: Enemies, Rivals or the Two Faces of Janus?

Some analysts see the Arab Awakening as a great Islamist revolution rivaling the 1979 revolution in Iran in terms of the social shock, although, of course, the Iranian revolution was limited to one country. Others argue that it is wrong

to claim that secular regimes were replaced by Islamic ones. First of all, not all of the former regimes were entirely secular. Moreover, the extent of Islamization of the new regimes is still not clear, nor is the outcome of the confrontation between the Islamists and the loose coalition of secular nationalist, left-wing and liberal forces that oppose them, all the more so considering the fierce rivalry between different groups and factions within each side.

As for the doubts concerning the nature of the old regimes, they were secular in the sense that the actions of the governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya were not determined by religious dogma. Political decision-making was not viewed through the prism of sacred texts, and power was legitimized mostly on secular grounds. At the same time, religious institutions were not fully separate from the state, and the educational systems and political discourse in these countries contained religious elements. And the leaders of these regimes tried to position themselves within the religious community by making various symbolic gestures and publicly demonstrating their commitment to the faith. Some introduced a number of Sharia precepts into law (Libya and Egypt), while others sought to establish pro-government religious parties (Tunisia). In Morocco, the king remains the country's religious leader with the title of Caliph, or Commander of the Faithful.

Some experts believe this understanding of religion is intrinsic in Arab culture, which means that the emergence of European-style secular political systems is unrealistic in principle, regardless of the Arab Awakening or anything else. The division into the religious and the secular in Islam is relative and exists as it were within the religion itself. The validity of this seeming paradox is confirmed by the Sunni maxim: Islam is both the religion and the state (*ad-din wa-d-daula*). Moreover, even Christians in the Middle East often demonstrate a similar attitude to the issue. It is not unusual to hear them say they are Christian by religion but Muslim by nationality. All of this, however, does not prevent the Islamists from regarding secularism (in the classical understanding of the term) as the main enemy of Muslim identity.

In accordance with the above point of view, both the pre-revolutionary political regimes and the Islamic parties and political organizations that have replaced



them are not necessarily religious parties. Quite often they are referred to as “secular Islamist parties” that advocate the formation of an “Islamic-oriented civil state” and are actively developing this concept.

If we go by this logic, no analysis of political processes in the Arab world, which proceeds from the assumption that Islam and secularism are in opposition, can fully reflect the reality. For many politicians this opposition is irrelevant. For example, Hamdeen Sabbahi, one of the leading candidates in Egypt’s presidential race in 2012, did not speak about religion during his campaign, focusing instead on democratization. In his opinion, both political Islam that rejects secular forces and secular parties that deny Islamist organizations’ right to exist are enemies of democracy, advocates of dictatorship and traitors to the revolution.

At the same time, many secular forces and a number of Islamist groups are demonstrating a mixed attitude to religious matters and are far from wishing that their opponents be ousted from the political arena. While attacking political Islam, secular parties almost never talk about separating religious institutions from the state or eliminating elements of religious indoctrination in the educational system. In some cases, mainly in Egypt, they prefer to call themselves civil rather than secular, and sometimes even form coalitions with moderate Islamists. As a rule, the moderates do not reject either the concept of universal human rights or the principles of democratic rule. Sometimes they even appear ready to acknowledge the secular character of the state.

They build their political strategy on rational arguments, invoking Islam as a rhetorical device. Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) is a good example in that it has recognized the secular foundation of the Turkish political system despite the party’s Islamic orientation. However, opponents of Prime Minister Erdogan’s party accuse it of promoting a “creeping Islamization.” An indicative development in this context is the recent heated controversy over the law limiting alcohol sales and ads passed by Turkish parliament. Opponents of the JDP regarded this as an assault on human rights and freedoms //Interview with Ihsan Ozkes, deputy of the Republican People’s Party from Istanbul, published



in the newspaper *Yenisafak* on May 30, 2013. <http://yenisafak.mobi/politika-haber/eski-muftuden-alkol-duzenlemesine-elest-30.05.2013-528211//>.

All of this shows that the rigid antinomy of secularism and Islamism does not fully reflect the reality of the Middle East. And yet this antinomy not only exists but seems to dominate the information space. The reason is likely rooted in the obvious fact that the religious, historical and cultural identity of both society and the state has moved to the top of the political agenda in the countries of the Arab Awakening, with the usual three projects in competition for the future – pan-Arab (currently marginal), liberal (pro-Western and relatively secular), and Arab Muslim represented by Islamic parties. These three projects tend to result in polarization, pitting the Islamist pole against the left-liberal pole, while smoothing over the contradictions between the liberal ideology as such and left-wing (usually pan-Arab) ideologies.

Thus, a clear contradiction is emerging. While at the level of practical politics and programs, both left-liberal and Islamist forces are prone to accept some synthesis of the principles of modern statehood and traditional Islamic values (albeit in different proportions), they never tire of accusing each other of double dealing at the level of political discourse.

Secular forces are accused of abandoning ancient Muslim values and traditions, while the Islamists are accused of seeking to create an Islamic state and rejecting universal rights and freedoms. In fact, it is these recriminations that form the basis for structuring the political space and determine the party identities in the eyes of the electorate.

The advocates of secularism in Arab countries claim that the Islamists are trying to establish theocratic rule and monopolize power and that they are incapable of effective governance and do not respect universally recognized human rights. They cite Iran or Saudi Arabia and interpret the current stage of the Arab awakening as the export of the Islamic revolution or the result of intrigues by Gulf monarchies with the tacit approval of the West. The secularists fear that the Islamists are moving their countries backward to an archaic past, and that the result will be dictatorship and economic collapse.



In turn, Islamists claim that their model for the political system is based on the positive foundation of traditional religious values, while the ideology of strictly secular parties is essentially anti-Islamic and negative, and their plans for the future are vague and rely on values borrowed from Western democracies.

Secular parties accuse Islamists of exploiting religion to seize power. They see the Islamists as reckless and unfit to govern. The Islamists defend themselves by pointing to the experience of Hezbollah, which has a long track record of success in the social and administrative spheres as well as regional politics. Or there is the example of the Hamas government in Gaza, which is maintaining stability and continues to enjoy popular support even in extreme conditions. They also recall that secular nationalists had their chance to carry out their project but they failed – their liberal policies and attempts to separate religion and state were not only negatively received by Arab societies but turned their countries into backward, failed states, giving rise to the Arab Awakening (the fate of Saddam Hussein's regime also comes to mind here).

Islamists: Builders or Gravediggers of Democracy?

Although the most engaged segment of society and the majority of political parties in Arab countries profess their commitment to democracy and their belief that to slide back to autocracy would be unacceptable, it is precisely the issue of democratization that is becoming a stumbling block in relations between different political forces in the region. How democratic were the elections that brought Islamist governments to power in the region? Are they consistent advocates of democracy, or do they secretly dream of monopolizing power and creating a new authoritarianism?

What in general is the meaning of democracy in the Middle East? As is clear, public consensus is elusive on these issues.

The Islamists emphasize that the legitimacy of their governments is already proven by their victory in free elections, during which voters expressed their be-



lief that political Islam is the force that will hopefully bring democracy, pluralism and freedom to society.

Their opponents counter this claim with two arguments. First, the electoral victory was narrow and does not indicate mass popular support, considering the modest levels of voter turnout. Moreover, people in these countries are not used to freely expressing their will and are guided at times by a simple desire to protest. This means that the Islamist parties do not have sufficient legitimacy to build new political architecture as they see fit. The second argument is that, having no experience of democracy or a real understanding of the essence of political debate, a parliamentary system or civil rights and liberties, Arab society is not ready to make an informed choice.

The opponents of the Islamists portray their victory as the result of applying political technologies, and describe them as defenders of their narrow party interests over national interests. They charge that the Islamists have stolen the fruits of the revolution and are trying to impose new authoritarianism.

The Islamists' opponents in Egypt cite as evidence the greater emphasis on Islam in the new constitution, the de facto conversion of the Muslim Brotherhood's Shura Council into a legislative body, and President Muhamed Morsi's attempts to expand his presidential powers against the will of the country and in ways that serve his party's interests rather than national interests. Similar moves have been made in Tunisia as well. In the summer of 2012, Islamists tried to make Sharia the foundation for legislation but had to retreat in the face of resistance from civil society. The Shura Council of the Islamist Ennahda party, essentially independently, appointed Ali Laarayedh as prime minister – a man who, as interior minister, gave the green light to numerous Salafi militias.

The Islamists' supporters believe it would be a mistake to treat all these accusations as entirely valid. The Egyptian constitution was adopted by referendum with almost two thirds of the vote. Even if today many disagree with its provisions, millions of people supported it at the time. Moreover, for the most part, the amendments to it had already existed in Egyptian law but as individual statutes rather than constitutional provisions. Finally, the constitution does not contradict the positions



of the country's main political forces on key issues, such as civil rights and freedoms, the status of religious minorities and women's rights. In Tunisia, Ennahda rejected the first drafts of the Fundamental Law and continued to coordinate it with the opposition.

When the decision-making bodies of the ruling Islamist parties perform legislative functions, they do so strictly within the legitimate framework. All laws are adopted by parliamentary structures and it is not the fault of Islamists that they have more seats and their deputies observe party discipline better than others.

Finally, Egyptian President Morsi or Tunisian Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh are both acting in line with mandates from the people, and there is as yet no evidence that they are promoting narrow party interests to the detriment of national interests. After all, Morsi acted as an Egyptian rather than an Islamist during the crisis in the Gaza Strip in the fall of 2012, and Prime Minister Ali Laarayedh has shown himself willing to rebuke radical Salafi groups.

Publicly Islamists altogether deny that there is a contradiction between their party interests and national interests. For example, the Egyptian Salafi party An-Nour, like the Tunisian Ennahda, has publicly rejected dictatorship, and expressed its support for universally recognized human rights and its readiness to work with all parties interested in constructive cooperation. Its party ideologists maintain that freedom in general and freedom of choice in particular are inherent in Islam, and for this reason Islamists are natural advocates of democracy.

At the same time, one cannot but acknowledge what many analysts identify as the Islamists' subjective approach to implementing their political program. Possibly the problem is not so much them as the disparity between their public support and the challenges they face. Having won a relative and largely opportunistic victory, they must now become agents of change. They must create new democratic institutions of government and procedures for governing. This obviously requires consensus among all political forces and segments of society.

If a democratically elected government takes a subjective approach to nation building, unleashing widespread discontent, while at the same time failing to create





channels for legitimate protest and influencing the government, can it be still characterized as committed to democracy? Wouldn't the street protests that ousted the former regimes be the only alternative in this case? Who can guarantee that the Arab Spring scenario won't be repeated over and over again? Are Islamists capable of yielding power if they lose elections?

Standards are one of the most important aspects of democracy. Representatives of Islamist political organizations describe the political process in the Arab Awakening countries, where they won the elections, as democratic by virtue of this circumstance and also because the new governments are performing their functions within the framework of laws and political competition. Their opponents emphasize that democracy is a process that includes the building of institutions, such as an independent judiciary, and the promotion of independent media as well as free and equal operation of political parties and NGOs. The ballot box is just the point of departure for this process. As the Iraqi experience shows, it is during the post-election stage that a democratic transition becomes most vulnerable.

In a situation where the majority of society seeks democracy without fully grasping its meaning and the ruling forces' interpretation of democracy and their sincerity remain questionable, there are understandable apprehensions about whether these countries will smoothly pass through this stage. As we can see, the Islamists themselves share these apprehensions over the smooth progress of nation building along democratic lines. Recognizing that their rich Islamic heritage must be used in political practice, some of them suggest substituting this heritage for certain elements of the Western political system with a view to making it more authentic and natural for Arab society. In this way, the Islamists are drawing a line between democracy as a principle of exercising power (which they accept) and democracy as a set institutions and procedures borrowed from the West (which they reject) //One of the participants in the dialogue said this: "We, Islamists, distinguish between democracy as a principle and democracy as practice." In his view, this ambivalence opens up many opportunities, but is also fraught with danger//. This ambivalence between tradition and modernity and between authenticity and universality opens up the prospect



of building a harmonious system, while also portending a possible return to dictatorship. Islamists believe that the only safeguard against this threat is their ability to make the right moral choice based on the tenets of Islam.

Needless to say, much will depend on whether Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia are willing to foster civil society and grant it some socio-political functions. In a sense, this will also decide how successful the planned and ongoing reforms will be, regardless of whether the state they produce is called democratic, Islamic, or democratic with an Islamic face.

Is Public Consensus Possible?

The heated debates in the Arab Awakening countries on the future of democracy with an Islamic face remain purely theoretical for the time being. It is impossible to build a democracy in a short span of time, especially when relying on endemic cultural and religious traditions. At the same time, the turbulence that has spread throughout the Middle East presents these new rulers with the concrete challenges of consolidating (or restoring) state institutions and making government administration more effective.

It is impossible to meet these challenges without a minimum level of public consensus and trust in political elites. Consensus and trust, in turn, are hardly possible because of the crisis plaguing the already weak national identities in these countries. This crisis manifests itself in a dispute between secularists and Islamists that is similar to the confrontation between Westernizers and Slavophiles in Russia in the 19th century.

In the 20th century, before the Islamists came to power, Arab countries went through two stages. Initially, national unity, stability and development were ensured by monarchies. Only in a few cases was absolutism a vehicle of modernization and progress. More often, it simply sought to perpetuate the traditional power relations and an archaic social organization, eventually triggering a series of revolutions in a number of Arab countries in the 1950s.

In the second stage, a politically active military became the main driver of reform. Consisting mostly of secular nationalists, the military was able to maintain national unity for some time, but, with the exception of Egypt, these regimes proved unable to ensure national consolidation and effective governance. As events in Libya, Yemen and Syria demonstrated, the militaries of the region were prone to internal fragmentation, resulting in a complicated and unstable system of checks and balances between rival groups. The essential difference between Arab military regimes and the Turkish army was the latter's ability to ensure for a long time (but not forever) both the existence of a system of government and the development of its institutions.

Neither monarchies, nor military regimes were interested in developing a civil identity. In the former case, national identity was reduced to recognition of the sovereign (in the form of an oath of allegiance to the monarch, or bay'a, which remains the symbol of loyalty in a number of states). The absence of fealty in military regimes was compensated for by harsh military authoritarianism. Both have ceased to exist, and if the new leaders want to transition to democracy, they must create and foster a responsible civil society.

In search of public support, the Islamists, who have their own view of history, must simultaneously imitate the West and draw inspiration from the times of the Prophet Muhammad and the Pious Caliphs. However, while in that remote past, public consensus meant points of contact between believers with different views on some religious and political problems, today it is primarily expressed in the ability of the government to accommodate secular Muslims, religious minorities, atheists and women. Otherwise ideologically motivated Islamists may prove more dangerous than the former military rulers in the Arab world, who had to fight for survival rather than actually govern for many years. If they fail, the Islamists will either have to give up power or will plunge the region into internecine strife and chaos.

In light of this, some feel that Arab societies should abandon the Islamic project in favor of a secular one. But recent history has shown that today secularists are equally determined to represent society as a whole. They think consensus can only



be achieved by drawing a divide between religion and politics. However, on this road they will face the same problem as their opponents (if in a mirror image): after all, for many years advocates of political Islam have been the most active and resilient part of civil society, and the fusion of religion and politics is the cornerstone of their political self-identification.

Another problem is that secular forces have demonstrated their weakness in the postrevolutionary period and now have to focus on attracting voters and preparing for the next election instead of analyzing the fundamental issues affecting society and national development. The victorious Islamists are preoccupied with the same concerns. In the past two years, they have lost some of their competitive advantage and must now operate in a competitive environment, for the first time in their history. Perhaps it's true that in the post-revolutionary period all fundamental problems and disputes have been subordinated to the short-term considerations of political groups fighting for power.

Given the fact that the internal Arab crisis is being aggravated by external players (primarily the West), whose state institutions are also being discredited and whose public structures are subject to an erosion, many experts believe the focus should be on finding mechanisms to ensure the survival of public structures and state institutions rather than on seeking civic identities and public consensus (which is impossible for the time being). In this context, it is important to consider two points. First, these mechanisms should not apply to individual countries. They must be universally applicable in the entire region, including states that have not yet joined the Arab Awakening, because close interaction between countries of the region, open borders and the free flow of information can easily spread instability and conflict. Second, these mechanisms cannot be based on a political system with a single dominant party (which is currently being imposed on some Arab countries by their Western partners). Otherwise we may see the restoration of the pre-revolutionary situation and, in the worst-case scenario, long-term, sustained development will become impossible.





Can Islamists Govern Effectively?

The very survival of society and the state in the countries of the Arab Awakening depends on the ability of the governing forces to halt the erosion of government institutions, ensure social and national security, and meet the moral and ethical requirements of the people. Critics of the new Islamist governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen claim that they are unable to meet any of these challenges. One Arab participant in the Valdai conference on the Middle East said that Islamists everywhere were trampling on the idea of a secular state and wanted to monopolize power, and that Western support for the Islamists was a mistake. She added that secular forces should assume responsibility for the future of their countries, while recognizing that this would be difficult after their betrayal by the West. This criticism speaks to how heated the debate over the future of the Arab Awakening countries is.

But there are quite a few people in the secular opposition who are optimistic that a considerable number of Islamists will undergo a political and ideological evolution, compelled by their position at the top of the political system to be pragmatic and seek cooperation with other forces in society.

However, as they expand their influence to all aspects of life, the Islamists become susceptible to the same vices that led to the collapse of their predecessors – nepotism, political patronage and clan systems. For example, Rafik Abdessalem, son-in-law of the leader of the Ennahda party, was made foreign minister in the first government of the three-party ruling coalition in Tunisia. People with personal ties to these new governments have also received prominent positions in the media, state corporations and the judiciary. Corruption has only increased following the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Well-known Tunisian human rights activist Mokhtar Yahyaoui has said, “A corrupt regime was replaced with a corrupt society.”

However, during the 2011 uprisings, civil society was not taking action against individual leaders so much as the vicious ruling systems they had come to symbolize. Now the key challenges are to build a system free of the old vices and to combine political democracy (institutional and procedural), which is making notable prog-

ress, with social democracy, or the responsibility of the state and elites for the state of society and to society. Neither Iraq nor the Palestinian National Authority have successfully managed democratization, to cite the two examples that show how complicated this task is. In the case of Iraq, political democratization led to greater violence and lawlessness in both society and government. The Palestinians have fared better, but the change of elites after Hamas came to power in the Gaza Strip still did not put an end to abuses. Hamas gained access to administrative resources in a political system that lacked political competition. As a result, Hamas, which won popular support on the basis of their perceived immunity to corruption (an issue they hammered Fatah on), could not completely avoid corruption. Having taken the reins of power, they failed to build competent administrative institutions and to resolve economic problems (although the blockade makes this extremely hard, if not altogether impossible).

The task of ensuring public safety is also difficult. During the Arab Awakening, security agencies were discredited in the eyes of the public, which has had a demoralizing effect on them. They have not shown sufficient loyalty to the new authorities. Threats to security increased many times over as a result of illegal arms trafficking, the dramatic weakening of border protection, and the consolidation of terrorist infrastructure in consequence of events in Libya and Syria. Actually, the current authorities are facing much bigger security challenges than their predecessors, and with extremely limited resources.

Meanwhile, critics of the Islamists believe that under certain circumstances, for example, if Islamists take control of the military and security services, they may be able to establish an authoritarian rule and monopolize power under the pretext of fighting extremism, while maintaining a formally democratic front (for instance, by imposing a state of emergency).

In this case, the regimes would be able to compensate their failure to evolve effective government institutions with strongarm pressure on society. This prospect inspires even greater fear in society, especially its most educated and modern strata.





The ineffective attempts by the current governments to resolve key developmental problems provide their opponents with an opportunity to talk about the need to establish non-partisan technocratic governments. However, the degree of social and political polarization over fundamental, existential issues gives rise to doubts as to whether there are any politically neutral technocrats in existence. Lack of party affiliation does not guarantee lack of bias. As such, the appointment of technocrats to top positions in the government would only help overcome the current difficulties, if this process were based on objective factors rather than perceptions of the “evil intentions” of the Islamists.

Some hold that the moral purity of religious movements, rooted in the sincere beliefs of their members, could, in theory, guarantee gradual institutional and economic normalization, as well as resolve security issues. If the moderate forces in power today do not demonstrate such purity, perhaps it will be demonstrated by their more radical brethren, who do not suffer from the cynical pragmatism typical of the moderates.

Calls are being heard to use Iranian and Saudi experience. In the case of Iran, there is a fairly clear division between the moral and ethical sphere, dominated by Islamic norms and values, and the institutional sphere, which is largely based on democratic procedures.

In the Saudi case, there is a division between socio-political relations based on traditional principles and the economy patterned on the Western model (it’s telling that Saudi Arabia lags far behind even some Western states in the sphere of Islamic banking). In both cases, Islamic morality and traditional values mediate social relations and ensure their stability, while also providing moral guideposts for the government’s economic and social policies.

However, even if radical Islamists prove themselves more effective leaders than the moderates, the threats that Arab societies will encounter on the road to national renewal will be no less serious than the current ones. The main threat comes from the more ideologically consistent Islamists who are clearly trying to impose their own vision of authentic Islamic morality and ethics on society and legislation. Obviously, such Islamization of public life will be met with resistance from important social groups, primarily religious minorities. This puts the issue of intra- and inter-religious relations at the top of the agenda in the Middle East.



3. Intertwinements of Confessionalian Contradictions

Relations between and within religious communities in the Middle East are evolving on three main levels: between Muslims and nonMuslims, between the Sunni majority and nonSunni minorities, and between different currents within Sunni Islam. The problems and conflicts that exist on each of these three levels have different causes, dynamics, prospects, and relevance for individual countries in the region.

Non-Muslims in the Middle East: A Fading Reality?

Almost all Arab countries have native nonMuslim populations, mostly Christian, but also Jewish. In addition, there is a small following of new religious movements and an insignificant number of atheists. The latter have never been mentioned in any sociological studies and are practically unrecognized, which makes it almost impossible to estimate their numbers. These groups, especially Christians and Jews, face three principal threats.

First, the deteriorating security environment has exposed them to attacks by radical Salafis. This threat is quite real in Egypt, which saw attacks on Copts in 2012, and Tunisia, where a synagogue in the nation's capital was attacked in the fall of 2012. This problem is likely to be resolved with improved law enforcement, which, of course, will depend on many factors, but none of them are related to inter-confessionalian issues.

The second and much more serious threat is that the new governments in the region will exploit sectarian tensions to deflect public anger onto minority groups. Opponents accuse them of a fundamental unwillingness to oppose violence against minorities.

According to the secular opposition, this is not only a product of Islamist ideology – which at its most radical treats Jews and Christians as infidels and calls on Muslims to wage jihad against them – but also the inherently totalitarian nature of the Islamist parties. Such parties need to designate an enemy, both external (Israel and the West) and internal (religious, sexual, and other minorities).

This, the opposition claims, is based on the natural affinity of all Islamist movements, their claim to a monopoly on sacred truth, and the fact that they have historically evolved as protest movements (always struggling against something and unable to offer a positive agenda).

In response, Islamists have emphasized their tolerance for minorities, periodically gotten tough with the Salafis (occasionally banning even some of their peaceful rallies), and established outwardly cordial relations with the leaders of minority religious groups. This, according to Islamists, shows that they are in fact the only agents of democracy in the region, no matter how vehemently they are being accused of totalitarian leanings.

However, these assurances have failed to convince the secular opposition, who see in these gestures only an attempt to save face before the West and consolidate their power. Neither does it seem to convince the Christians and the Jews, who have been fleeing the Arab Awakening countries in growing numbers.

The third threat to the rights of religious minorities is the gradual Islamization of all spheres of social and political life.

While the first two threats target the Christian and Jewish populations, the third one concerns society in general and is closely linked with the broader human rights issue in the Middle East. Responding to the opposition's accusations, the Islamist authorities point out that none of the official documents adopted or proposed by them, including constitutional declarations, draft constitutions, party programs, etc. contain anything prejudicial to minority interests.

Nevertheless, the problem, as we see it, is not a matter of law, but rather of social relations. However good the new laws are, the broad reIslamization of society



along Salafi lines (not accounting for the specific Islamic traditions of individual countries) will create an uncomfortable environment for minorities, forcing them to either leave or create enclaves of their own and become marginalized.

This threat is particularly significant in countries where Christians make up a substantial portion of the population and inter-confessional contradictions are dramatically intertwined with intra-confessional contradictions, mostly between the Sunni majority and Shiite minorities, such as Imamites, Zaydis, and also Alawites, and others.

The Sunni-Shia Schism: Who Is Threatening Whom?

There are Shiites and related groups among Muslim populations in many Arab countries (such as Alawites in Syria, Zaydis in Yemen, and the Imamites in Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and even Egypt, which is home to about 20,000 Shiite Imamites). Accordingly, Sunni-Shia relations are a problem in all of them. The extent, as well as the origin, of the problem depends on a number of factors, including foreign influence, historical circumstances, and matters of Islamic religious doctrine.

Almost all Arab countries were ruled by Shiites at some point in their history (the Idrisids in Morocco, the Fatimids in Tunisia, Egypt and the Syrian-Palestinian region, the Qarmatians on the Arabian Peninsula and in southern Iraq, and the Zaydi Imamate in North Yemen), and memories of these periods are still very much alive today.

Shia Islam evolved in the early centuries of Islam as an anti-government religious movement, whose adherents challenged the supreme authority of the Sunni caliphs.

Today, it still has considerable potential for protest.

Combined with what many see as Iran's positive example of a Shia state, these factors could prompt many in the Muslim world to opt for Shiite rather than Sunni Islamism, as opposed to a secular model.





This possibility, however unlikely it may seem, is already causing the Islamists (particularly the Salafis) to treat the Shiite minority as a “fifth column” in the Islamic world. This is largely due to the hostility to Iran and its grand political ambitions in the region and the Muslim world in general. The Egyptian government, fearing Shiite propaganda, even banned Iranian tourists from visiting the country in 2013.

Relations between and within religious communities are most dramatic in situations where confessionalism shapes power relations and a political system. This has been the case in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, and, to a certain extent, Saudi Arabia, whose eastern region has close to two million Shiites living under constant pressure from the conservative Sunni authorities.

Bahrain stands out in this list by virtue of the national dialogue its government launched in July 2011. This initiative, which brought together representatives of 300 civil and political organizations, has proved largely successful *//This does not exclude the possibility of renewed tensions in the future. Critics of the initiative have accused the government of dealing with confessionalian contradictions instead of addressing fundamental issues of human rights and political freedoms//*, allowing the Sunni authorities to embark on a path to reconciliation with the country’s disgruntled population, mostly Shiite.

Bahrain’s successful experience has a lot to do with the fairly strong position of the ruling regime, which enjoys security guarantees from the member-states of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG) and sufficient resources to tackle existing problems. Moreover, the problems Bahrain faced were relatively simple. Despite the dangerous combination of extreme social and political stratification and sectarian division in Bahrain, the authorities of this small nation had to address the grievances of only two main groups that are not geographically localized and that generally accept the legitimacy of the ruling dynasty.

In other countries the situation is more perilous. Lebanon and Iraq have lived (and are still living) through the horrors of inter-confessional confrontation. The violence that engulfed Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein has



reduced the Christian population from 1,500,000 to 400,000 people and aggravated antagonism between Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites.

This has led to increased geographic seclusion of the three groups and rising separatist sentiments. It should be mentioned that radical Islam has not taken root among the Kurds, whose ethno-national agenda remains the priority.

The civil war in Lebanon took the country to the brink of disintegration and resulted in the ethnic sorting of Christian, Shiite, Sunni, and Druze communities, which previously had been dispersed fairly evenly throughout the country. Both countries have so far avoided disintegration due to policies of outside players, relatively pragmatic government behavior, the general war weariness of the population, and the continued interdependence of the communities. All of these factors have made it possible to achieve a certain confessionalian balance.

But the threat of disintegration remains very real, given the possibility that the Syrian conflict could spread to these countries or that the influx Syrian refugees could upset the balance.

In countries like Tunisia and Egypt, where sectarian tensions are less pronounced, the fate of religious minorities will largely depend on developments



within the Sunni community itself, particularly between various factions of the ruling Islamist parties.

The Competing Factions of Sunni Political Islam

The coming to power of political Islam has naturally heightened internal divisions. The main criteria for distinguishing various Islamist factions are their attitude toward democracy and liberal values (including minority rights), attitudes to doctrinal theology in the exercise of political power, and the extent of pragmatism in policy-making.

Based on these criteria, three groups within political Islam – moderate Islamists, Salafis, and jihadists – are usually identified. The first group accepts democratic norms and procedures, does not reject liberal values, recognizes the role of rational arguments in political debate, and is generally pragmatic.

Salafis, while accepting the democratic process, insist on value pluralism on the global scale and advocate a specifically Islamic value system. They play by democratic rules, but still support the idea of an Islamic state. Finally, the jihadists reject any political system rooted in liberal democracy.

While this classification is more or less universally accepted, some experts propose an alternative scheme based, not on current political behavior but rather on the goals pursued by various groups. They are distinguished by their attitude toward society, government institutions, political opponents, and religious minorities.

1. Liberal Islamists. This group is prepared to accept a democratic political system, while upholding an Islamic identity. If this approach prevails, Islamic political parties will merely occupy a niche in the overall party system. Provided there is consensus in society on historical, cultural and religious identity, these parties will be similar to European conservative parties that advocate traditional values.

Liberal Islamists are a purely national political force. They see Muslim unity, at best, as regionalism, and the caliphate as a potential integration structure in the Middle East. The group's nationalism is reflected in their respect for existing government institutions, which they seek to reform and ultimately modernize, bringing them in line with democratic standards (which is supposed to eventually sideline the army and special services in the government).

This group see secularism and secular parties as opponents but not enemies (as opposed to morally unacceptable atheism). Finally, they are quite open with regard to ethnic and religious minorities, and are even prepared to enroll their representatives in their ranks.

2. Proponents of a long game. Advocates of Islamic statehood and the unity of the Islamic ummah, they realize that achieving these goals in the short term is not feasible. Since assuming power in 2011, they have encountered a num-

ber of complicated social and economic problems, which they have been unable to resolve. They have responded by turning to the intellectual legacy of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, who argued that Islamization of the state first of all required the Islamization of society.

Recognizing both the impossibility of solving the existing economic problems and their limited public support (as demonstrated by recent protests in Egypt and Tunisia in November and February respectively), they seek to use their current time in office to secure positions in key public spheres – primarily religion, education and the media – through which they can transform society. Meanwhile, they continue their efforts to discredit anti-Islamist political forces.

If they succeed, the political landscape in the region will be completely reshaped according to Islamic principles, leading to the emergence of “Islamic democracy,” a kind of Sunni version of the Iranian political model. The democratic process and modernization would proceed, but within a larger Islamic logical and semantic paradigm that rejects secularism. However, proponents of the long game do not seek to destroy or forcefully displace secularism, but rather to make it intrinsically unacceptable to society.

For now, Islamists focusing on the long game are ready to downplay religion in their rhetoric and to be guided by national interests, even temporarily foregoing the idea of Muslim unity (but keeping it for the future).

Objectively their main opponents are not even the secular parties (with which they are forced to cooperate with today to secure public support), but the Salafis and jihadists, with whom they share approximately the same values. The latter may be tempted to resort to violence to retain power, which could alienate the public from political Islam.

For this faction, tackling real social and economic problems is not currently of much importance. They mostly continue the policies of previous governments, while adding some populist issues like fighting corruption and overcoming the legacy of the old regime. Once in opposition, they will use leftist populism to increase their popularity with the public.



Salafi Parties of Egypt

Al-Asala, founded in 2011

Al-Watan, founded in 2013



Leader

Adel Abdel Maqsoud Afifi

Emad Abdel Ghafour



Sharia/legal

Calls for Islamic law

Supports Shariah as the general law



Women

Grants political and social rights to women

Seeks to improve awareness of women's rights. Supports women joining the party and playing a role



Copts

Opposes Copts running for the presidency

Supports law guaranteeing freedom of religion. Supports Copts joining the party



Economic

Seeks to reposition Egypt as a major regional player in trade and international economic agreements

Supports increased investment in agriculture and scientific research to improve agriculture. Seeks to develop foreign trade by increasing exports



Foreign policy

Seeks to strengthen relations with Nile Basin countries. Rejects the Camp David accords entirely

Seeks to strengthen relations with all Arab countries



Constitution

Wants to replace "principles of Islamic Shariah" with "rulings of Shariah" (article 2). Wants to replace "Sovereignty belongs to the people..." with "Sovereignty is for God alone (article 5)

Opposes Article 2, because the word "principles" limits the scope of Shariah

Al-Nour, founded in 2011

Al-Raya, founded in 2013

Leader

Younes Makhioun

Hazem Salah Abu Ismai

Sharia/legal

Calls for Islamic law

Supports Shariah in legislation and in practice

Women

Advocates encouraging women to remain within their traditional roles in society and discourages them from pursuing careers and positions of leadership

Official platform does not address the topic of women

Copts

Supports freedom of religion for Copts and allowing them their own personal status laws

Seeks to promote justice between all individuals in society of different religions and classes

Economic

Supports economic equality and the redistribution of wealth. Opposes privatizing natural resources. Supports the expansion of Islamic banks. Denounces foreign aid and loans

Seeks to harness Egypt's already existing investment potential and allocate resulting funds in a socially equitable way

Foreign policy

Respects existing treaties and conventions. Calls for improving Egypt's regional and international role

Against the influence of Western powers, particularly Israel and the United States

Constitution

Supports Article 2, which states that Islam is the religion of the state and that Islamic law is the main source of legislation

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Source: Middle East Institute

3. Proponents of a blitzkrieg. Like the previous group, they are upholding Islamic statehood and the unity of the ummah. However, they do not believe a long-term strategy for the Islamization of society is the most effective route. Their fears are understandable, as there is no guarantee that the appointments made by current authorities will not be reversed in the future, meaning they would be unable to continue Islamizing society once in opposition.

Therefore, their main objective is to maintain the status quo as long as possible and to stay in power after the transitional period. Apart from engaging in propaganda and attempting to discredit opponents, their most important task is to gain control of the levers of power which, for a long time, underpinned the stability of the ousted regimes, especially security agencies and the judiciary. Winning their support would allow Islamists to minimize the likelihood of the Algerian scenario.

Opponents claim that this faction is capable of limited and controlled use of political violence, the diffusion of which would give them a pretext in the future (provided they have the loyalty of the army and the internal troops) to declare a state of emergency and cut short the ostensible democratic transition.

This is certainly an adventurist scenario that eventually implies the monopolization of power, suppression of civil activists, and a general relapse into archaicism.

The last two factions agree on fundamental issues. Their disagreements are mostly tactical in nature. Moreover, some experts believe that our description of these factions is not based on reality, but is, in fact, an attempt to offer two alternative explanations of a single moderate Islamist strategy.

Indeed, both the proponents of the long game and supporters of *blitzkrieg* recognize the need to preserve and gradually reform the existing state institutions. Their attitude to secular forces is almost the same, although *blitzkrieg* advocates are more active in their efforts to discredit them by conflating secularism and atheism in their rhetoric.



Hypothetically the greatest source of disagreement is their attitudes toward civil society and the creative class. For *blitzkrieg* supporters, these are hostile elements with alien, secular ideals and values, who pose a real threat to their plans to monopolize power.

On the other hand, proponents of the long game believe it is important to secure the support of these social groups not only for current purposes, but also in the longer term. And they urge serious engagement to gain their loyalty.

4. Salafi romantics. Unlike the three previous factions, which are rational and pragmatic in their political behavior, the Salafi romantics believe that the power they hold has been bestowed on them by God and their major task is to keep it and rapidly Islamize society and the state.

They don't seek compromise with other political forces, and the interests of the ummah obviously outweigh national interests for them. Many are willing to use violence to keep Islamists in power.

The Salafis are the internal loyal opposition, who can criticize the Islamists in power, while being prepared to defend them. They are urging leaders of Islamist parties to immediately introduce Sharia law and transform the political system. If need be, their activists can form party militias or fighting wings of Islamist parties.

5. Jihadists. The jihadists are similar to the previous groups in all respects except for their attitude to moderate Islamists, whom they consider traitors to the Islamic cause. Still, the differences between these two factions are relative, and according to some experts, they can adapt their political tactics as circumstances dictate.

In terms of numbers, the last two groups are clearly marginal. However, their willingness to use violence makes them a real threat to the public in the Middle East. This threat is compounded by the ongoing civil war in Syria, the spread of Libyan arms in North Africa, and conflicts in the countries of the Sahel.

Most of these factions within Islamist political parties are not institutionalized or even readily apparent. The division of Islamists along these fault lines





may occur in the future, and it is not by far a cinch that it will be a full-scale dissociation. It is quite likely that various groups will form blocks within unified Islamist organizations (this can take the form of factions or group in the organization's leadership). And yet, this process is already under way, particularly in Tunisia and Egypt.

The situation in Libya and Yemen differs somewhat from other countries. In both cases, the religious identity of political parties and organizations is secondary to the tribal and regional divisions in society. As a result, as noted by Tunisian Islamists, the nominal liberals who came to power in Libya are pursuing even more religiously oriented policies than the Islamist Ennahda party.

On the other hand, in Yemen, even in the ranks of the most influential Islamist party, Al-Islah, there are those who hold similar beliefs as liberal Islamists (such as Nobel Prize winner Tawakkol Karman), as well as their more conservative opponents.

Both liberal Islamists and Salafi romantics are not very influential in Islamist leadership circles, which are dominated by proponents of the long game and *blitzkrieg*.

4. Political Islam and International Relations in the Middle East

How Will Islamists Change the Region?

The rise of political Islam in Arab and international politics continues to radically alter the alignment of forces in the region. Old relationships based on the temporary affinity of interests are giving way to new alliances characterized primarily by religious affiliation and the ambitious plans of regional and for-



foreign players to use the volatile situation in the region to gain an edge in the fight for regional leadership and spheres of influence.

An alternative view is that the Arab Awakening has eliminated the foundations of regional solidarity, and now every state is openly guided only by its own political and economic interests. The newly empowered forces are mainly trying to determine who their enemies and allies are, based on the mood of the street, rather than developing evidence-based programs to address current challenges.

Middle East analysts unanimously agree that the transformation of Arab societies will continue to evolve and spread. Political parties and movements who want to effect fundamental democratic change in their countries need to make up for lost time and prepare for what is coming. There is cause to expect in the short term major upheavals in the Gulf monarchies. A considerable number of foreign-educated young Saudis are in no mood to support the kingdom's archaic status quo, which has held back the country's socio-political development. The generational change in leadership, in turn, may aggravate the confrontation between different clans and their patrons.

We believe the region has entered a protracted period of political chaos, economic decline and even existential threats to certain states. The danger of disintegration, terrorism and other manifestations of radical Islam has grown in a number of countries (Libya, Yemen, Iraq and Syria). And the new ruling elites have not yet consolidated power or demonstrated an ability to achieve the goals and ideals they proclaimed.

The political reorganization of Arab nations will continue to be an uneven, rocky process marked by occasional backtracking. The new authorities have to contend with enormous problems inherited from the old regimes and engendered by the revolutionary explosion itself. Economics and politics are closely interwoven in this complex equation with many unknown variables.

Experts emphasize three key knots of problems that will ultimately determine the course of the transformation in the region, shifts in the regional balances, and the region's relations with the outside world, primarily the West and Russia.

The first one is how the situation in Egypt (still the key country despite losing some influence) and to some extent in Tunisia plays out. The second one is the outcome of the civil war in Syria, its consequences for neighboring Arab countries, and its effect on the balance of power between key regional players, such as Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. The third one is about progress (if any) in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, which is no longer a Middle East foreign policy priority, having been pushed into the background by the Arab Awakening, especially developments in Syria.

Egypt, Tunisia and other countries may ultimately follow an Islamic though essentially democratic path – this is precisely what the Muslim Brotherhood is trying to bring home to the people who put them in office, hoping to reassure the frightened liberals. The West is attempting to achieve the same in cooperation with international financial organizations. The degree of its influence will be one of the factors that determine whether Egypt and the rest of the region will travel down the path of modernization in the spirit of current realities. At the same time, the role of the West should not be exaggerated, despite its efforts to exploit Egypt's dependence on foreign financial aid (what is contributed by the Gulf states is clearly insufficient). Given the current alignment of forces in the region, Cairo has considerable latitude for political maneuvering.

For over 50 years, Egypt was an influential center of Middle East politics, despite its renunciation of pan-Arabism. The chaotic nature of its political transformation has undermined its influence. Egypt has become more dependent on the Gulf States, which have gained clout in the Arab world not counting money from Islamic foundations, official financial assistance to Egypt from Qatar and Saudi Arabia has exceeded \$10 billion, which obviously restricts Cairo's freedom in matters of foreign policy. This is unlikely to change in the short term.

Despite its internal upheavals, Egypt still plays an indispensable role as the first Arab country to conclude a peace treaty with Israel. It is also an informal mediator in the arduous Palestinian-Israeli dialogue, something that was reaffirmed during



the exchange of air strikes between Gaza and Israel in October – November 2012, not long after Muhammad Morsi became president. Egypt also continues to act as an intermediary between the two major Palestinian movements, Hamas (which is close to the Muslim Brotherhood) and Fatah. As in the times of Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian intelligence community continues to supervise this dialogue.

Regime change in Egypt caused concern in the international community over the future of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and raised questions about the nature of Egypt's further relations with the Palestinians, and possible adjustments to its policies in the region. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has not yet figured out how to build relations with Israel, but there are real reasons to believe that a cautious and pragmatic approach is winning out. The Egyptian authorities are backing up their official pledges and intentions to honor the peace treaty with coordinated actions and, in effect, tacit cooperation with Israel in suppressing terrorist activities on the Sinai Peninsula.

Moreover, the Egyptian security services are containing the attempts by Palestinian extremists to use the security vacuum on Sinai to stage provocations. In turn, Israel is turning a blind eye to Egypt's violations of some of the treaty's provisions regarding its presence in Sinai's border areas.

Cairo occasionally makes it clear that some of the treaty's provisions should be revised, namely, those that only allow Egypt to have a temporary and limited military presence in border areas for the purpose of conducting counter-terrorist operations. Egypt may also seek to revise gas contracts with Israel, as the anti-Israeli ultra conservatives in the Muslim Brotherhood insist. (Israeli analysts note the general rise in anti-Israeli sentiment in Egypt.)

Cairo has changed its tactic towards Hamas. Mubarak's tough line – sometimes close to the Israeli stance – has been replaced by a milder approach. It hopes to establish control over the most radical factions of Hamas and gradually push it in a direction that benefits Egypt's national interests. Qatar and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia are approaching Hamas in a similar way, using the desire of many





of its leaders to break out of international isolation and shed the terrorist label. Much will depend on Israel itself; for now it is not only inflexible in this hazy time in the Arab world but actively narrowing the chances for a viable Palestinian state with its West Bank policy.

The civil war in Syria is exerting an enormous influence on the region. As we see it, Jihadist Islamists are planning to take power with the help of military force. The outcome of this conflict, in which the interests of Gulf monarchies, Turkey and Iran clash, will determine not only the nature of Syria's further political transformation but also the fate of its neighbors.

Jihadist groups that adhere to the Al-Qaeda ideology, for instance, the Al-Nusra Front *The Al-Nusra Front has openly acknowledged its affiliation with Al-Qaeda*//, which mostly consists of foreign volunteer fighters or mercenaries, make no attempt to conceal their resolve to create a "state based on Sharia that completely rejects all secular laws and democracy" after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. The next step is to "establish a caliphate in the Levant" (Bilad al-Sham).

The hypothetical victory of the secular elements in the armed Syrian opposition could not put an end to the hostilities. The Al-Nusra Front and its allies would not lay down arms and will continue the war. If the Assad regime is overthrown, the disunited "victors" will then fight each other for power, and the Islamist forces would have a good chance of prevailing in this struggle. This outcome would inevitably weaken the cause of moderate political Islam in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and other Arab countries, and embolden Al-Qaeda affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, North Africa and the Sahel.

If the Jihadists win, ethnic and religious clashes are bound to surge in Syria, and rapidly spread to neighboring countries. Some experts believe that this scenario could lead to the partition or cantonization not only of Syria but also other countries, primarily Iraq and Lebanon.

Israel is concerned by the prospect of Syria's disintegration. Israeli leaders consider al-Assad to be the main source of problems. They do not fear the rise



of Sunni radicals as long as the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis is broken. However, the potential collapse of the Syrian state cannot but cause Israeli apprehensions. There is a growing view that a radical regime can be contained if its country remains intact. Otherwise Israel will have a limited deterrence capability, and its nuclear arsenal could escalate tensions even further.

The growing confrontation between the military-political alliance of the Gulf states and Iran may become a factor in reformatting the region. Actually Syria is caught in the middle of this confrontation, which is increasingly sectarian in nature. The Gulf monarchies are supporting the burgeoning Sunni groups and even ultra-conservative Salafi groups in an attempt to oppose Iran with its nuclear ambitions and propensity to harness the groundswell of Islamism for its own interests. Apart from the fear of Iran and its military might, the anti-Iranian bias is the result of the political repercussions of the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent withdrawal of coalition troops without proper security guarantees. The change in the confessional balance of forces in Iraq in favor of the Shia majority has stoked fears in Saudi Arabia and especially Bahrain, where Shiites are the majority of the population.

Turkey clearly is playing a greater role in the new regional context. In fact, this has been true for the last few years, but the developments in Arab countries have given fresh impetus to its regional policy. Turkey's ruling party claims its motivations are moral – to support populations rebelling against authoritarian regimes. Some experts believe that by siding with the Arab street, Turkey now faces a difficult choice, which is most pronounced in Libya and Syria. Ankara supported the NATO operation in Libya after it evacuated its own citizens. The logic of events has made Turkey and the West espouse similar or parallel interests with respect to Syria. Experts point out that when the events in Syria began to threaten Turkey directly (shelling of its border territories, refugees, etc.), its natural desire to bring the conflict to a rapid conclusion transformed into a desire to get rid of the Assad regime, hence its support for a no-fly zone and arming the opposition. At home the Government has been criticized for becoming part of the con-

The role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's political system

Some facts:

- An international religious and political association
- The Muslim Brotherhood is on Russia's list of extremist and terrorist organizations
- Motto: "Islam is the solution"
- 1960-1970s: the movement spreads to the United States and Europe. The movement is active in the Soviet Union, influences Central Asia
- 1980s: the Palestinian Islamist Organization HAMAS is founded as a branch of the movement

The Muslim Brotherhood in the world:

- Branches in over 70 countries
- 1930-1950s: their ideas spread outside Egypt; groups emerge in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan and other Arab countries

1928

School teacher Hassan al Banna founds the association in Ismailia (Egypt). Education and charity work begins

1950 – 1951

The Brotherhood is legalized as a religious association. Hassan al-Hudaybi becomes the new leader

1936 – 1939

The organization takes on a political outlook based on the principles of the Quran and Sunnah

1948

The Brotherhood gains significant political power, holding 2,000 branches and 2 million members. A terrorist attack is unleashed against the Egyptian government and Prime Minister Mahmoud Nukrashy Pasha is assassinated

1952

Supports Gamal Abdel Nasser during the July Revolution

1954

Conflict with the revolutionary government of Egypt, unsuccessful assassination attempt against President Nasser. The association is banned. Activists are arrested or leave the country

1964 – 1968

General pardon of the imprisoned activists. Three more unsuccessful attempts to assassinate Nasser. Several leaders of the Brotherhood are sentenced to capital punishment

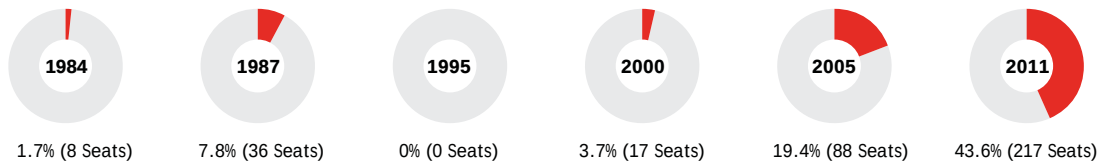


1928-1949
Hassan
al Banna



1949-1972
Hassan
al-Hudaybi

Seats in the People's Assembly, Egyptian Parliament's lower house



1970

Nasser dies, Anwar Sadat becomes president. The state's attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood relaxes. The Brotherhood's activity in Egypt intensifies

1979

The association condemns the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and takes up a radical oppositional stance

1980s

Sadat is murdered by members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Brotherhood's spin-off terrorist group. Hosni Mubarak becomes president. The organization is still officially banned. The Brotherhood takes part in peaceful campaigns, cooperates with political parties, nominates its representatives as independent candidates in elections

1990s

Boycott of the parliamentary elections after the toughening of the election law

2000s

Success in the parliamentary elections: 88 seats in the People's Assembly in 2005. The Muslim Brotherhood becomes the largest oppositional parliamentary party. The Egyptian authorities intensify efforts to clamp down on the Brotherhood

2010

Boycott of the parliamentary elections following mass fraud in the first round

2011

The association keeps a low profile during the revolution to avoid further repression and founds its own political party, the Freedom and Justice Party

2012

The Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohammed Morsi wins the presidential election. The Freedom and Justice Party takes over 40% of the seats in parliament

2013

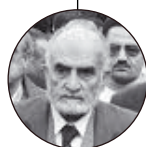
The Muslim Brotherhood is officially registered as an association in Egypt. President Morsi is ousted



1972-1986
Umar al-Tilmisani



1986-1996
Muhammad Hamid Abu



1996-2002
Mustafa Mashhur



2002-2004
Ma'mun al-Hudaybi



2004-2010
Mohammed Mahdi Akef



since 2010
Mohammed Badie

flict rather than part of the solution. Turkey's position on Syria has highlighted its more active role in the region, which makes it possible to maintain a balance between different foreign policy vectors – NATO membership, regional ambitions and Turkish nationalism with Islamic features.

At the same time, Turkey plans to deepen ties with Egypt, whose leadership fully supports this idea. We believe the Egyptian leadership realizes that it is impossible and unnecessary to copy the Turkish model. Still, relations with Turkey are natural and desirable. Turkey will be a promising partner and doesn't raise the hackles of any political force in the country. Moreover, relations with Turkey counterbalance ties with Iran. It is common knowledge, the Egyptian bureaucracy is against relations with Iran, and, for all its pragmatism, the Muslim Brotherhood cannot see Iran as its partner for religious reasons either.

The West has also come to realize that the region is in for long-term destabilization if the radicals prevail in the Islamist movement. As veteran US diplomat Henry Kissinger has warned, "Regime change, almost by definition, generates an imperative for nation-building. Failing that, the international order itself begins to disintegrate. Blank spaces denoting lawlessness may come to dominate the map, as has already occurred in Yemen, Somalia, northern Mali, Libya and northwestern Pakistan, and may yet happen in Syria." *IIThe Washington Post, June 4, 2012//*

Given this turn of events, the international community's strategy of supporting moderate Islamists, who profess values that do not contradict the general democratic context, and bringing them into the democratic fold may fail. The rift between the West and the Islamic world would then begin to resemble a clash of civilizations.

In Russia, there is an essentially marginal view that in this scenario it will be able to promote the Islamic project as an alternative to the Western neo-liberal model. We believe the new Arab rulers have an interest in developing relations with Russia ||*'According to some representatives of Islamist parties, the new forces that have come to power must be open to the world and ready to develop partnership*





with the countries that did not pursue colonial policy (Russia, China and India). They should normalize relations with Iran and adequately meet the requirements of national minorities. Successes or failures in resolving these major tasks will determine the future of political Islam// (in part, as a counterbalance to relations with the West) and we must be ready to respond in kind. However, by playing on the contradictions between Islamic and Western models of social organization, multi-religious Russia could create grave problems for itself at home.

Foreign Intervention: Protecting the Population or Overthrowing Regimes?

Foreign intervention is among the central problems of the last few decades, and it continues to be controversial. The Arab Awakening and the struggle of the (often armed) opposition against authoritarian regimes have made international intervention an imperative in the minds of some politicians. But this tool has become too politicized in the hands of those who are prepared to employ it. The framework of intervention has also broadened from aid to regimes or their opponents to fullscale military invasion.

The checks and balances system in the Middle East has taken shape over centuries. But foreign intervention in Iraq destroyed the long-established triangle of stability in the region based on the mutual deterrence of Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran. The war in Iraq freed Iran's hands and spurred its nuclear program.

The forms of foreign intervention and its effectiveness vary depending on the severity of the threat posed by a regime and the degree of consensus in the international community regarding the choice of response and its legitimization. The conceptual framework for foreign intervention aimed at de-escalating conflicts is found in such terms as preventive diplomacy, humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect.

The latter two concepts are relatively new, and there are still no clear criteria for determining whether the methods and aims employed by foreign powers really

correspond to the principles behind these concepts, or reflect a selfish desire to steer events to their advantage. The emergence of new forms of intervention is the result of heightened international attention to state violence against civilians or ethnic and religious groups and new trends in how national sovereignty is interpreted.

“The time of absolute sovereignty has passed; its theory was never matched by reality,” former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said. “It is the task of leaders of States today to understand this and to find a balance between the needs of good internal governance and the requirements of an ever more interdependent world.” //Boutros Ghali, *An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-Keeping*, New York, 1995// While most experts acknowledge, at least in word, that this is a fair conclusion, they are deeply concerned that, in the era of globalization and greater supranational contacts, the complete renunciation of the idea of sovereignty may destroy practically all international norms and relations. It is also important to keep in mind the opposing trend: newly independent countries and postrevolutionary states in the Middle East tend to see sovereignty in absolute terms. These new regimes are largely guided by a nationalism that rests on an Islamic rather than secular foundation.

The commonly accepted definition of sovereignty is the right of a state to complete self-government on a certain territory and a monopoly on decision-making. At the international level, this implies non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. To this day, there is no consensus on what human rights violations can justify a military intervention.

International law and norms provide for the protection of civilians during hostilities between states. In the event of an internal conflict and buildup of violence within one state, the restrictions imposed by sovereignty not only become an obstacle to observing these laws but also call for the drafting of new ones. The state is primarily responsible for protecting its own population and it has the necessary tools to do so. However, it can also pose a threat to its own citizens, for example, when it sacrifices the interests of certain individuals and groups for the sake of other groups or the majority. A struggle for control over government institutions poses an even bigger threat. Political violence has become essentially a permanent feature in some countries. If a state cannot or will not prevent an impending disaster, the principle of non-interference gives way to the principle of international protection of the population.

We believe it is both methodologically wrong and historically unlawful to set the concepts of sovereignty and human rights in opposition, but in some cases foreign intervention is absolutely necessary. However, there are well-grounded concerns that outside forces may intervene – even with the sanction of the UN or regional organizations – to achieve their own political ends. Chaotic changes to the rules can lead to an alternation of alliances and allies. For instance, in Mali external forces are fighting against the very people they supported in Libya. At the same time, a foreign intervention can pursue entirely practical objectives. Not



accidentally, some believe that France introduced forces in Mali primarily because of its interest in uranium deposits in the north of that country.

Some analysts hold that view – which may be able to reconcile ardent opponents and supporters of foreign intervention – that interventions are not bad in and of themselves, but rather because: a) the existing legal framework to regulate them is inadequate; and b) only a few countries (or groups of countries) are capable of carrying them out. If everything is determined by ends and nobody cares about the means, parties of international relations are eroded and rules become vague. The means of intervention employed today are ultimately aimed at achieving abstract and vague goals and ideals, such as dissemination of democracy in societies that do not share liberal values.

It is common knowledge that President Barack Obama has shifted the focus of outside interventions from military power to soft power, which is certainly a positive step. However, the notion that democracy should be promoted in different societies remains an extremely ideology-driven instrument of influence.

According to international law, an intervention does not have to be a last resort, after all other options have been exhausted, in order to be legitimate. There is a temptation to opt for simpler and faster solutions instead of the long and ineffective search for political solutions, which in principle has rehabilitated the use of military force in modern international relations. Also, in situations with heavy loss of life and the possibility of even greater violence, sometimes an immediate response is required in order to prevent the worst-case scenario. A key consideration in this event is how great the threat to international security is. The brutal massacre in Rwanda did not prompt foreign intervention, which some analysts attributed to double standards.

One can identify three models of intervention motivated (formally) by the goal of effecting change in a country.

1. Restoring statehood and governance: introducing international coalition troops into a failed state that has become a gray zone and a source of global and regional threats (Afghanistan).



2. Invading a country ruled by a dictatorial regime and lacking a powerful domestic resistance movement bent on overthrowing the regime and leading a transition to a more liberal model of governance; pretext: the regime poses a potential threat to peace and security (Iraq).
3. Support for an opposition movement or military protection from the regime (Libya), as well as financial and military aid to the opposition, stopping short of direct military intervention (Syria); in this case pressure is exerted on the regime with a view to replacing it.

Relative to the latter two cases, the actions of the coalition in Afghanistan met with little criticism despite civilian losses. Experts point to several reasons for this: the collapse of the state in Afghanistan and the absence of forces in the country capable of finding compromise independently and starting the process of rebuilding the country after years of civil war; fragmentation of the participants in the political process; the archaic nature of Afghan society; and the inability to counter criminals and terrorists. Foreign intervention was necessary to neutralize the threats emanating from Afghanistan and set the country on the path to normal development. Critically, coalition forces were introduced into Afghanistan not only for the sake of transforming it but also to counter international terrorists who could operate with impunity in a country without a normally functioning government. Afghanistan was perceived as the frontline in the fight against terrorism, a threat that had acquired global proportions. This drew attention away from some of the coalition's miscalculations and setbacks.

The situation in Iraq was different. The regime of Saddam Hussein used harsh methods to ensure the country's territorial integrity. No totalitarian terrorist organization dared challenge his authority. The lack of a persuasive justification for the invasion explained the lack of consolidated international support. The primary objective was to overthrow the regime, not to counter a global threat. Outlawing the Ba'ath Party, disbanding the army and transitioning to a government model that drew power from the Shiite majority

rather than Sunni minority have delayed stabilization for many years. Iraq, still suffering from serious systemic challenges, is an example of a failed intervention.

Military intervention in a country with an active civic confrontation and growing civilian casualties is even more complicated. The ruling regime is to blame for creating the situation, and totalitarian or strongly authoritarian regimes are usually incapable of internal transformation. Radical political reforms are seen as a concession to the modern educated and relatively westernized segment of society, which cannot and will not prop up the regime.

Authoritarian leaders are becoming hostages to a policy that leads to destabilization, as modern opposition forces are followed by the traditionalist masses that – in light of foreign support – can only be stopped by direct and massive violence. This formula is not universal. There are examples of relatively peaceful transitions in countries with developed political institutions, where rulers do not cling to power against all odds. Egypt and Tunisia are both transitioning independently, although clashes continue and there is growing polarization between moderate and radical Islamists.

Foreign intervention can be justified when the number of victims sacrificed on the altar of maintaining the old order exceeds all proportion and no transition can take place for lack of effective agents. In this context, there still a need to specify evaluations and approaches to the events in Libya. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the Libyan regime was prepared to destroy the opposition, which necessitated intervention. On the other hand, the vague provisions of UN Security Council Resolution

1973 and the discrepancy between the goals of the intervening forces and the objectives set forth in the resolution resulted in actions that were incompatible with the UN Security Council mandate to stabilize Libya. The attempts to curb the regime's use of violence against its own people led to the extrajudicial execution of Muammar Gaddafi.



The main challenge for Libya is the restoration or formation of government institutions that are either still weak or did not exist under the Gaddafi regime. Libya is still a victim of militia anarchy and internal threats to security.

However, even if there are huge losses and fierce clashes that cannot be stopped without direct foreign intervention, this does not mean that this intervention is possible. Using special forces to enforce peace means taking sides, which in a civil conflict will always be perceived as a politically motivated move. In Libya, NATO forces were actually fighting on the side of the opposition and the result of the Libyan operation in certain measure discredited the very idea of intervention.

Support for the regime or the opposition amid a civil confrontation also qualifies as intervention, with Syria being the most controversial case in point. Both the Assad regime and the opposition are supported by global and regional forces. The United States and other Western countries, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are all actively pursuing their own course. Israel is periodically bombing Syria. Non-state actors capable of large-scale and far-reaching actions are playing an increasing role. These are organizations, political parties and foreign fighters from other countries in the region that are attempting to influence events in Syria. It appears the world is entering a new stage, in which various groups are becoming the key players and the interaction of external forces is becoming less and less organized. Syria is an example of a bloody and fierce war that has reached a kind of dynamic equilibrium because of continuous outside support for both sides.

Neither side has managed to tip the scales in its favor. Losses have run into tens of thousands (but let's not forget that up to 200,000 people were killed during the 10-year occupation of Iraq) and the country is in ruins. However, we believe that foreign intervention would not stop the slaughter even technically. The Syrian case has revealed the serious limitations on humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect. First, UN Security



Council members support opposite sides of the conflict and have different views on military intervention. Second, given the fierce nature of the conflict in Syria, no forces introduced into the country would be able to gain a foothold. They would come under attack and would be unable to impose a ceasefire. The crisis in Syria began with peaceful demonstrations against the regime that were brutally suppressed. With time the opposition became more radicalized and launched an armed resistance.

Today rebel units, which include many mercenaries and foreign volunteers, are committing human rights violations on the same or larger scale than the regime. Both sides will fight till the end. They are well armed and committed. Each side has its patrons and sympathizers outside of the country.

A solution may be found if an agreement is reached at the global level (between Russia and the United States), provided there is close coordination with the regional players that are directly influencing events.

The room for maneuver should be sought right now because the international community has been treading water on Syria. There is a proposal to establish an international committee on Syria with the participation of major global and regional actors that would work out a common position on Syria and determine the steps needed to settle the conflict.

The process of political decisionmaking that could lead to a military intervention is not fully in line with the current complex situation. The media are playing a huge role in shaping public opinion and political decisions on the basis of a virtual picture that may be far removed from reality. In all cases, greater bilateral and multilateral contacts with regimes and opposition forces, fact-finding missions and international NGOs should become important tools for verifying information coming from zones of conflict.

It is important to assess the outcomes of previous cases of foreign intervention. The results have often been dubious, and the mistakes made will remain on the conscience of those responsible for the invasion. Needless to say, they are not the only culprits – part of the blame rests with the in-





ternal forces they counted on but which proved unable to handle greater political responsibility. It may be useful to revive the practice of issuing White Books on the reasons for an intervention's successes and failures.

Foreign intervention will always rouse many negative emotions. But wherever there are conflicts it will always be an accompanying factor of influence, promising to either help put an end to them or fuel them. As for the international community, it should try to observe the established rules more carefully so as not to finally destroy the fragile and irreplaceable balance of forces in regions and within individual states.

5. The “New” Middle East: Political Islam and Russia's Interests

Russia's fundamental interests in the Middle East seemed stable and immutable for a long time. Traditionally, Russia had a stake in establishing friendly relations with all countries in the region, fostering trade and expanding markets for its military and civilian products, coordinating efforts in the energy sphere, preventing anti-Russian alliances from being formed, countering extremism and terrorism, and so on. Basically these interests remain valid to this day, but the context, in which Russia acts to promote its interests in the Middle East, has become significantly more complex and calls for new approaches.

The situation began to change following the Arab Awakening, which revealed deeper, more organic bonds in the context of regional and global relations. The rise and consolidation of political Islam in the Arab world, the election of Islamists following popular revolutions, and the prospect of greater Islamist influence on political processes have become common features of the Middle East today and are likely to remain so in the future.



The Russian Federation is a multiethnic and multi-confessional country with a significant Muslim population. It positions itself and is perceived as part of the Islamic world (consider its observer status in the OIC), and borders on Muslim countries. Therefore, the changes underway in the Middle East will significantly increase the importance of this region in Russia's foreign policy.

The majority of Muslims in Russia are Sunnis in the Hanafi tradition, which can coexist with Orthodox Christianity. In general, there is no hostility between Christianity and Islam in Russia. There is no aggressive atheism in Russia either, and in terms of values Russian Orthodoxy is close to Islam. Muslims play an important role in the country, even without having their own political parties.

Russia has experience working with neighboring Muslim states, has long-standing ties in the Arab world and no history of colonialism there. Russia is the legal successor of the Soviet Union, which was a strong supporter of Arab national liberation movements.

Throughout the 1990s, Russia maintained and promoted relations with countries in the region, but due to its limited resources at the time it could not and did not seek to meaningfully strengthen its positions in the Middle East. Russia's policy mostly focused on promoting business interests, continuing the country's involvement in the Middle East peace process, and maintaining some degree of relations with all regional players at a purely non-ideological level. As a result, Russia's Middle East policy was increasingly routine in nature. Unexpectedly, the Arab world awoke and a really new and unfamiliar Middle East emerged from the Awakening.

The main element of novelty is that events in the Middle East have suddenly acquired an internal political dimension for Russia. Today, the challenges emanating from the region are having an impact on Russia's domestic policy, which makes the current situation significantly different from the past, when Moscow could afford to formulate its interest in the most general form.

Actually, Russia has become a field for the complex interplay of secular and religious forces, including moderates and radicals within Islam. Russia and the countries to its south, which are critically important to Moscow, have



found themselves squeezed between an Arab world in the grips of revolutionary transformations and Afghanistan, which may see the resurgence of radical Islam following the withdrawal of foreign troops.

These trends are creating a new and more favorable environment for advocates of political Islam in Russia, who can now count on broad support and assistance from foreign partners, including various non-state actors (foundations, organizations, etc.).

The extent of a country's exposure to foreign influences is always determined by the severity of its internal problems, and Russia is no exception. Historically, Russia has been home to various ethnic groups with different religious beliefs, traditions, degrees of modernization, and political and social involvement in the life of their state.

It is well known that socio-cultural differences can be quite significant even within the same ethnic group. The populations of large cities in Russia are very different from residents of small, often depopulated villages and towns that are cut off from modern culture and the modern economy.

In a number of Russia's Muslim regions, this socio-cultural rift is very pronounced and characterized by clan-based politics, archaic elements, a lack of social justice, biased law enforcement, utterly unfair wealth accumulation, unemployment, and systemic corruption.

Faced with the discrepancy between proclaimed, constitutionally guaranteed principles and the actual situation on the ground, people turn to radicals who offer clear and simple solutions. The success of the radical sermon in Russia will also depend on how events in the Arab world and Afghanistan unfold.

The current threat of destabilization emanating from the Middle East is not limited to the Islamist factor alone. Foreign interference is perceived as an even greater security risk for Russia. Many Russian and some foreign experts believe that the recent events in the region are closely linked to attempts by some Western states to impose, directly or indirectly, an alien neo-liberal agenda on countries in the region.

Since liberal ideas are alien and incomprehensible to the traditional segment of the population, foreign interference can only result in the ousting of legitimate governments and their replacement by politically inexperienced opposition leaders who are unprepared to assume responsibility for their country. According to experts, the consequences could be even more disastrous in the event of a military intervention to support the opposition. This could further intensify interfaith and ethnic contradictions and result in the disintegration of statehood. Under this scenario, the West will find itself acting in tandem with Islamic radicals and could be perceived (in its approaches to the Syrian conflict, for example) as wittingly or unwittingly abetting the victory of the extremists.

The segment of the Russian political elite that distrusts the West, rightfully or not, has a problematic interpretation of differences in political systems, viewing them as a source of existential conflict. In this context, the events in the Arab world are explained as Western schemes (along the lines of standard conspiracy theories) and political tactics that can be potentially used in Russia (e.g. fears that the West will foment an “orange revolution” in Russia or something worse). Shifting the focus from domestic political actors that have been the main drivers of the Arab revolutions to foreign players greatly distorts the reality.

The Syrian conflict has been a major challenge for Russian foreign policy. Unlike the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, where the role of foreign interference could be disputed despite the rise of anti-American sentiment (particularly during the recent election campaigns in Russia and the United States), there is no doubt about the extent of foreign involvement in Syria. While Bashar al-Assad can hardly be called an ally of Russia, Moscow has supported the legitimate Syrian government against attempts to overthrow it by the Syrian opposition, which consists of an extremely motley group of political forces that is held together by foreign support. The opposition forces insist on al-Assad’s resignation as a precondition for any negotiations. Russia’s firm and principled position, calling for a political solution without preconditions, has not always been met with understanding in the Arab world and the UN Security Council.





Russia's policy to uphold international law has been often interpreted as an egoistic desire to keep Bashar al-Assad in power at any cost. This is not to deny that Russia's stance on Syria has also been motivated by instrumental considerations. Moscow wants to demonstrate to the West and a number of regional actors that its position and approaches to international issues must be taken into account.

The same reasoning was behind Russia's decision to supply Syria with S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems under previously signed contracts, and its plan to revive the Mediterranean squadron, which, according to experts, is directly linked with the situation in Syria. The search for additional leverage is always justified, but it is important to ensure that Russia is not perceived as being directly involved in the conflict (which, however, has been the case with other players).

In reality, the conflict in Syria can not only divide Russia and other global and regional players but also be a source of opportunities for rapprochement and constructive dialogue. The US-Russian agreement to convene a conference on Syria has created a new mechanism for interaction between global and regional players, despite persisting differences.

The desire to find a compromise solution has been gaining momentum. No one wants more bloodshed in Syria or for radicals to gain power, which would have disastrous consequences for the country and the region. And yet, the US decision to arm the Syrian rebels, and the EU's de-facto lifting of the embargo on arms supplies to Syrian rebels (notwithstanding certain restrictions) ahead of the forthcoming conference on Syria, the training of militants by Western instructors at specialized camps has paved the way for continued bloodshed, the wholesale destruction of the country, and an escalation of the conflict.

The spontaneous nature of the Arab Awakening and the fact that many political parties were unprepared to take part in it, including by offering an attractive social and economic program, predetermined the victory of the Islamists, who had effective and disciplined political organizations, information outlets and sufficient financial resources at their disposal. And since this process is far from over, the political parties and movements interested in leading a profound demo-



cratic transformation of their countries need to make up for lost time and prepare for the upcoming events.

What's clear, however, is that the forces that have emerged in the forefront of the political process have to prove that they can be agents of change, that they understand their historic responsibility, and that they are prepared to assume the burden of tackling unresolved problems. The more progress they make on this path, the more interested Russia will become in establishing and expanding ties with moderate Islamists. For Russia, as a country with a multicultural heritage, being ready to promote relations with the new governments in the interests of fostering dialogue between civilizations is one of its fundamental values.

Russian Muslims could act as a bridge between Russia and the Arab world. In this regard, it is particularly important to restore educational ties, including opportunities for Russia's Muslims to study in Arab countries and for Arab students to study in Russia. Thousands of Arab students were educated in the Soviet Union and many of them have Russian wives, but Moscow has failed to use this informal resource of influence.

Russia rightly criticizes extremists in the region, but it also needs to practice a differentiated approach to Islamist organizations. There are Islamist groups and parties whose agendas are essentially local. They pursue national goals and have no interest in expanding their activities beyond their borders in order to support Islamist groups with dubious goals and reputations. One such localized group is Hamas, which quickly grew disillusioned with the actions of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan after concluding that they were controlled by the US and Saudi Arabia and pursued goals that had little in common with the cause of jihad. Hamas has never backed Islamic separatists in Russia due to the fact that their struggle also has little to do with Islamic ideals and that Moscow has always been supportive of the Palestinian cause. Russia has also worked to reconcile Hamas and Fatah, and there is hope that they will finally form a single government.

This does not mean that Moscow has to unconditionally support all of Hamas's actions, but we believe that Russia should accentuate the differences between this



movement and the more radical and irresponsible Palestinian Islamist groups like Islamic Jihad or terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda.

President Vladimir Putin's negotiations with his Egyptian counterpart Muhammad Morsi in Durban, South Africa, followed by the Egyptian President's official visit to Moscow, signaled Russian willingness to build relations with the new Islamist-led governments. This process has been welcomed by the overwhelming majority of foreign members of the Middle East Dialogue.

Both Russia and Islamic parties must understand each other better to carry out their common tasks of countering extremism and terrorism with a view to securing stable development. Politicians and experts agree that the struggle between moderates and radicals will largely determine the future of Middle Eastern countries //Some experts, however, disagree with this position. The most hardline secularists question the need for cooperation with the Islamists in the Middle East. The Islamists, they claim, disparage the very idea of a secular state, seek to establish a theocracy, and disregard universal human rights. At the same time, representatives of the al Nour Party emphasize their opposition to any kind of dictatorship and their support for generally recognized rights//.

The experience of Arab countries with religious extremism could be very useful for Russia and its allies. It can also draw important lessons from how religious and secular forces interact in the region. Russia has always been and will remain a secular state. It simply could not exist as a single state in a different format. But in a multi-faith society this interaction has dynamism of its own, something that calls for new approaches better suited to new international and national realities.

Arab analysts believe that Islamist regimes and parties need to foster mutual understanding and cooperation with Russia and to establish a dialogue with its public and political circles. Due to possible existence of bias in Russia regarding the role and place of Islam in society and politics, the focus should be on explaining the agendas of the new Islamist governments, their domestic and foreign policy goals, their attitudes toward religious and ethnic minorities, and the place of women in Muslim society.



Russia also must do more to improve its image in the Arab-Muslim world and to explain its foreign policy goals and actions so that they are not interpreted as hostile to the interests of the new Islamist governments and political forces in the Arab East. At the same time, Russian policy should be nuanced and carefully considered, as the Muslim world is obviously not a single whole. It encompasses groups of countries with conflicting religious and political interests. Apart from the official level, reputational actions, as we see it, should take the form of scientific, cultural, public, women's, youth and sporting exchanges, contacts between NGOs, as well as joint cultural, sports and student festivals. This will make it possible for representatives of different cultures and traditions to overcome mutual distrust and bias and foster a better mutual understanding.

6. Afterword

As this paper was being prepared for publication, Egypt entered a new phase of its transformation. Following a new wave of protests, this time directed against the President and Islamists, the military removed President Morsi from office, dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution, and formed an interim government to run the country until new elections are held. While unexpected, these events have confirmed some of the conclusion made in this paper.

First, the Arab Awakening promises to be a long and painful process, during which the countries in the region might experience more change and turmoil.

Second, street protests in the Arab world have become a serious political actor that can trigger systemic changes in state system.

Third, the military, at least in Egypt, remains one of the most influential forces not inferior even to such a powerful player as the Muslim Brotherhood, which secured the support of nearly half the nation's electorate.

Fourth, Egyptian society, just as in Syria and many other countries in the region, is divided, and this fragmentation will be difficult to overcome. So far, there are no clear winners or losers, but the new authorities will be just as hard-pressed as the Muslim Brotherhood to address the challenging social and economic problems facing the country.

It is noteworthy that the United States, which enthusiastically embraced the downfall of Mubarak's regime and threw its weight behind the moderate Islamists who proclaimed a commitment to democracy, basically backed the military coup that ousted Egypt's democratically elected president.

The Egyptian Interior Minister's decision to shut down religious TV channels is hardly in keeping with the democratic ideals of the West. The Saudi King supported the military coup two hours after General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced that President Morsi had been deposed and sent a congratulatory message to the new President Adly Mansour immediately after his appointment. Other Gulf States have also welcomed the coup (with the exception of Qatar, which has been supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood).

The fact that Turkey condemned the coup suggests that tensions are building up between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the two most influential regional players, which have been almost unanimous in their support of the Syrian opposition. According to some analysts, the Turkish government was demoralized by the coup in Egypt. *Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia Cheers the Coup in Egypt," The Daily Beast, July 7, 2013*//, which will inevitably have a serious impact on Ankara's policy towards Syria.

Some experts even claimed that the social and political model pursued by Prime Minister Erdogan's Justice and Development Party was facing a serious crisis, as demonstrated by the ongoing protests in Istanbul and other major Turkish cities. The downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood has also scared the leaders of Hamas, who increasingly had been taking cues from the Islamist government in Cairo.

We believe that the unfolding situation in the Middle East is likely to make political Islam an even more important factor in regional and world politics.



Middle East Crisis: Foreign Interference and an Orgy of Extremism

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The Middle East is one of the most turbulent regions in the world today, engulfed by a wave of conflict and violence that threatens international security. Fed by rapidly growing religious extremism in the Arab world, the wanton destruction that characterizes the recent violence adds a new dimension to the long-simmering Arab-Israeli conflict that periodically erupts in armed clashes. The popular Arab journalist Hisham Melhem writes: “The Arab world today is more violent, unstable, fragmented and driven by extremism – the extremism of the rulers and those in opposition – than at any time since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago.”

The blitzkrieg launched by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which has adopted the simpler, if more ambitious, name of Islamic State, was as sudden as it was predictable. The current surge of jihad sentiment in this part of the world is rooted in the recent past, which began when the US and its allies invaded and occupied Iraq without UN sanction. The years-long occupation is estimated to have left nearly 500,000 dead in addition to creating several million refugees and displaced persons.

The Americans committed three major mistakes in Iraq: banning the Ba’ath party, dissolving the army, and dismissing the government bureaucracy. It is also clear why they did it. There were fears that these institutions were incapable of change and, if left intact, could resurrect the old political and social order. While Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly a cruel dictator who brought sorrow to a huge number of his fellow countrymen and many others in neighboring Iran and Kuwait, these decisions destroyed the state institutions that supported what had been a secular nationalist regime. The country’s new rulers have never managed to fill the resulting power vacuum in Iraq or to placate the volatile mass of dissatisfied skilled professionals.

A no less serious mistake was the US policy of exploiting sectarian divisions. To be sure, the Shiite population in Saddam’s Iraq faced discrimination, and the need to rehabilitate them and do justice was clear. But the rehabilitation process was not based on national consensus. Instead the Americans backed Shiite religious parties – the Islamic Dawa Party, also known as the Islamic Call Party, and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. Washington’s “Shiite project” was essentially a religious one, turning the Sunnis into a persecuted group and predictably stoking hostility between the different sects, let alone the inevitable hostility that would arise towards the indigenous Christian minority that had lived peacefully for centuries in these lands. Meanwhile, justice and rehabilitation for the Kurds has led to the emergence of Kurdish quasi-statehood. Social fragmentation has increased as a consequence, and plans for nation building and a full-fledged nation state in Iraq seem illusory. In letting the “sectarian genie” out of the bottle, those who hoped to democratize the country and create a functioning government by military force doomed it to internecine strife. It was easy to destroy the old regime, but military force cannot build anything new.

The Iraqi army under Saddam was one of the best fighting forces in the Arab East. In 2003, confronting a US-led invasion, the army command thought bet-

ter of mounting what would have been a doomed resistance to a superior enemy, and saved the Iraqi capital from destruction by reaching an understanding with the invaders. This was facilitated by many people in the military and the civil service who “quietly opposed” the dictator and blamed him for the troubles that had befallen Iraq. The army, like the Iraqis at large, was tired after the bloody wars Saddam had unleashed against Iran and Kuwait.

According to Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the United States must heed the hard lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan in the future (and this is an entirely realistic proposition judging by the movement in US opinion polls). Among other things, Cordesman says it is important never to “fall in love with a mission.” But it looks like our partners have yet to fully absorb these lessons.

The surge of fanatical jihadi groups during the occupation of Iraq was fought back by the occupying forces and the new Iraqi government with the help of local tribes. But the jihadists had merely redeployed to the north to prepare for the capture of Mosul and neighboring towns. The most radical of all Islamic terrorist groups in the region, ISIL or IS, achieved just that in its lightning offensive earlier this year. As its name suggests, the extremists want to create an Islamic state in an area that includes Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine. At first Western and local politicians and experts, who had overlooked the group’s rise, estimated that it had between seven and ten thousand fighters. Today they put that number closer to 40-50 thousand. These are extremely cruel and ruthless jihadists, hardened by the fighting in Iraq and Syria and superior to the enemies if only in their willingness to die for the cause. They are receiving generous financial support from sources based mostly in the Arabian Peninsula. Quite a few IS fighters hail from other countries in the region as well as Europe, America and Eurasia. As soon as they gained control of Raqqa, Syria, they committed a series of heinous mass executions, killing anyone who didn’t share their doctrine (primarily religious and ethnic minorities) and introducing strict Sharia law. Neighboring states are dealing with a massive refugee crisis as a result.

It should not be forgotten, however, that IS units invaded Mosul with the help of tacit allies who shared the same tactical goals, including purged military officers and officials of the former Iraqi regime as well as followers of Nakshbandiya, a Sufi sect and apparent ideological opponent of the jihadists. As a result, the precursor for a cross-border Islamic state was created, occupying only parts of Iraq and Syria, for now. Hummers captured in Mosul were sent to Syria and used for a patrol mission in the IS stronghold of Raqqa. Other weapons abandoned by the Iraqi army were also sent to Syria.

But aside from barbarically torturing, maiming, beheading and shooting dissidents, IS has created a semblance of order, albeit circumscribed by their rigid ideology. They have created a large number of decent-paying jobs, reduced crime, and en-

couraged agriculture and trade. The local Sunnis, at least, are getting used to the new rules. There is fear but also stability.

IS controls oil production in Syria and engages in lucrative black-market oil trading. Syria's low-sulfur oil, which can be processed at small makeshift refineries, is sold to shadowy Turkish dealers at vastly reduced prices. This is reminiscent of Baghdad's clandestine oil dumping to circumvent the sanctions under Saddam, when buyers included many neighboring states, including countries that were far from friendly towards Iraq. Business is business, particularly in this lucrative industry. Experts estimate that IS was bringing in as much as \$2 million a day until the US began striking oil installations in northern Syria, thus depriving IS of this important source of revenue. But the jihadists still have huge cash reserves plundered from banks in Mosul.

The Islamic State's victories have inspired Islamic extremists around the world, raising the risk of terrorism and extremism spreading outside of the region. There is no doubt that IS recruits will eventually return to their countries of origin to carry out attacks, which fact seems to have dawned even on countries that Moscow has long been warning of the international threat of terrorism.

Now regimes that ignored the scale of this threat have joined the US-led coalition against IS. But within these countries, there are still doubts about the sincerity of the coalition members. The Saudi intellectual Turki al-Hamad asks how Saudi religious leaders can oppose the Islamic State's extremist ideology, if they disseminate a similar ideology both at home and abroad. Hamad's skepticism is echoed by former Iranian nuclear negotiator, Ambassador Seyed Hossein Moussavian, currently a research scholar at Princeton, who points out that the Arab allies of the United States have spent billions of dollars over decades to propagate this extremist ideology in the Muslim world and continue to do so even now. Like many other experts, he believes that the US and its Arab allies lack sufficient ground forces to win the war.

One of the weaknesses of the coalition's war against the Islamic State is that it is non-contact in nature. You cannot win a war solely through air strikes, which inevitably lead to civilian losses that only fan anti-American sentiments and damage the reputations of US partners. On the ground, the IS butchers are opposed only by the Syrian government forces and Kurdish militias.

Another weakness is that the coalition lacks regional inclusiveness. It makes no sense to exclude Iran, Syria and several other non-state actors who are involved in the fight anyway and, moreover, are the chief targets for the terrorists. Paradoxically, the coalition architects have demanded that Syrian opposition forces attack both IS and government forces. The US would like Turkey to send in ground forces against IS, but, as Ankara said in early October, it would only commit troops if a buffer zone was established in the Kurdish-populated Syrian border areas, backed up by a no-fly zone (which recalls the intervention in Libya). The Turkish leaders need a place to send the 1.6 million Syrian refugees living in its borders and the Kurds fleeing the IS offensive. The Turkish preoccupation with the refugee

problem is understandable. But many in the West and in the region believe Turkey's true aims lie elsewhere.

First, Turkey wants the Assad regime deposed. As Deniz Arslan wrote in *Today's Zaman*, this is Turkey's priority, not the fight against IS. Despite Joe Biden's apology to Turkey for suggesting that it abetted the rise of the jihadists, American officials and media continued to criticize the Turkish government. The *New York Times* wrote on October 9 that the Turkish leader was so eager to topple Assad that he helped ISIS and other extremists by letting militants, weapons and money flow through the Turkish border. US analysts have also expressed skepticism of the buffer/no-fly zone idea. IS has no aircraft, so the purpose is clearly to keep the Syrian air force out of the area, which will soon become a huge training camp for all sorts of insurgents, including possibly covert IS supporters. Questions have been asked in Turkey as well. The co-chairman of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party, Selahattin Demirtaş, inquired: "ISIS has neither planes nor helicopters. Why is Turkey insisting on a no-fly zone? Why is it so urgent? Whose planes and helicopters are they going to keep out?"

Second, Turkey wants to bleed dry the Kurdish militia controlled by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which both Turkey and the US regard as a terrorist organization, and to neutralize the Kurdish national movement in Syria that seeks autonomy along the same lines as Kurdistan in northern Iraq. "Ankara wants to kill two birds with one stone," argues Turkish journalist Cem Sey (T24). "One bird is Assad. The other is the only force fighting ISIS – the Kurds." But is Ankara's secret goal really to weaken the Kurdish militants? It's possible. After all, President Erdogan said not so long ago: "For us, the PKK is the same as the ISIS."

But no matter how the situation in Iraq and Syria develops, there is no doubt about the sort of tactics IS will employ if it suffers reverses on the battlefield. The masked militants will disperse, hide their weapons if necessary, and blend into the civilian population. It is also clear that the IS militants will infiltrate the so-called buffer zone for antigovernment forces – which include Islamist groups that are regarded as "moderate" by Western and some regional actors – and will train in that "sanctuary."

Clearly, the US administration has been eager to make a deal with Erdogan in which Turkey sends ground forces to Syria. Indeed, IS cannot be defeated unless there is a strong land force engaging it on the battlefield, and President Obama certainly does not want another failure in the Middle East on his hands. But the White House has also been reluctant to get involved in a "big Syrian war," fearing that Ankara's main aim was to topple the Assad regime rather than destroy IS. This is not to say that the US has given up the idea of overthrowing Assad; in fact, it is taking meaningful steps to bolster the anti-Assad opposition. Among other things, the Pentagon plans to drill 5,000 militants of the so-called "moderate" opposition per year at its base in Saudi Arabia (Adm. Kirby said in early October that training would start within three to five months).

Meanwhile, Russia argues – not without justification – that Western countries have become safe havens and indoctrination centers for the jihadists, including those from the North Caucasus, some of whom have already spilled the blood of civilians in the US (the terror attack at the Boston marathon on April 15, 2013). Chechen jihadists from Georgia, Turkey and a number of European countries, which earlier granted them asylum as “freedom fighters,” form a sizeable (as well as the most brutally effective) group of foreign terrorists fighting in Syria. By contrast, Russia has managed to stabilize Chechnya following two wars and to reconcile with former foes. According to Dr. Guido Steinberg of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, the Chechen jihadists in Syria are a “problem for the internal security of Europe and Turkey,” because many of them come from diasporas in Georgia or Turkey, “dozens are from Austria and France, and a few are from Belgium, Scandinavia and Germany.” It is believed that IS includes between 1,000 and 2,000 Chechens.

The threat of IS has caused the overwhelming majority of regional and global actors, including Russia, to realize that they have interests in common. Particularly dangerous is the growing number of extremist organizations in the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa joining the terrorist colossus. Given the crisis in relations between Russia and the West caused by the unjust sanctions war over Ukraine, it is unlikely that we will take joint actions to counter the jihadists. But our clear common interest in bolstering the resistance to this threat could lead to operations on parallel tracks, which would require a certain level of coordination.

The Islamic State might be defeated in the end, if the international community, with the active participation of regional players, devises a comprehensive strategy for eliminating religious extremism in the broader region. But will it be possible to put the genie of bitter inter- and intra-faith hostility in the Middle East back into its bottle? There is a deadly feud not only between the Sunnis and the Shiites but also among the Sunnis themselves: Al-Qaeda and IS, the Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, etc. Isn't it time for the Arab world to contemplate a broad reconciliation strategy, reject deadly internecine strife and policies of regime change, and join forces in the fight against jihadi extremism?

The Middle East: from conflicts to stability

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- *From the very start The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a time bomb, the ticking of which we have not been able to stop in a hundred years.*
- *Chaos is the only alternative to already established borders.*
- *Modern terrorism is the worst threat to global peace and stability.*
- *Super high politicisation of the issue of terrorism complicates the search for a consensus on the status of individual organisations.*
- *Consolidation of governmental and civil society institutions in the Middle East and the drafting of a roadmap for the economic recovery of states in the post-conflict period are no less important than the settlement of conflicts.*
- *Russian Aerospace Forces operations in Syria facilitated the change in the domestic balance and opened opportunities for breakthrough solutions on the road to political settlement.*
- *A political process in Syria would not only help find a compromise between the key players on the Syrian political field but would also build up trust via cooperation between the main external and regional participants in the conflict.*
- *Regional and global cooperation in the Middle East requires the elaboration of agreed-upon and more coherent rules of the game. This is achievable through negotiations of the interested parties, not only of individual conflicts, but also in relation to the general development strategy in the Middle East and the future of its nations.*
- *The formation of a regional security system must rule out unilateral military action without the relevant mandate and in violation of international legal standards. Addressing the issue of regional security, including Russia's concept of creating an area free of weapons of mass destruction, demands that its framework, main tasks, and parameters all be redefined. The already available developments should be combined with those approaches, that to a larger degree, take into account the modern dynamic of the on-going military-political processes in the Middle East.*

I. Five Years of Turbulence

The mass-scale protests in Arab countries triggered a tectonic shift in the Middle East. Its entire system of cultural, social, economic, and political relations is undergoing reconstruction.

This reconstruction can be attributed to mostly internal causes – political, economic, cultural, and civilisation-related – but there is an obvious link to the most alarming trends of global development. Its gist lies in the loss of control over international processes, the return of the factor of force, the growing role of accidents, the strengthening of the world's periphery, and the crises of national states and identities.

In some countries participation in politics is expanding, political systems are modernising and part of the political elite is being replaced by new blood; peo-

ple are now conscious of the fact that reforms are required and that there needs to be effective responses to new threats and challenges. However, the weakening and, in some cases, the destruction of statehood in a number of countries, the civil wars in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, the hundreds of thousands of victims and millions of refugees, various humanitarian catastrophes, the expansion of terrorism, and the consolidation of the Jihad alternative, now a global threat, have all become very significant factors in the current world.

The overall result of the region's transformation is so far negative. The resetting of the regional system of international relations has triggered the destruction of old alliances and the formation of new ones. Non-governmental actors that sometimes pursue their own goals and sometimes act on behalf of external forces are playing a key role in this process. The countries destroyed by civil wars have turned into arenas of proxy wars.

The transformation has not yet reached its apogee, not to mention completion at any level. The outlines of the region's future arrangement are not yet visible and there are still no grounds to talk about the complete dismantling of the old system. Many regional states have largely adapted themselves to the new conditions. Yet it is unknown whether they will lay a solid foundation for a new Middle East or will be plunged into the whirlwind of turbulence. Russia is convinced **that the all-round consolidation of their institutions** is just as important today as the settlement of all current conflicts.

Under the circumstances, the Russian Aerospace Forces operations facilitated the change in the domestic balance and opened opportunities for breakthrough solutions on the road to political settlement. Russia made this unexpected decision not to consolidate its influence in the region, but rather due to its concern over the growth of destructive trends near its borders, the pinnacle of violence and terrorism, and the agony of statehood.

II. Bye-Bye Sykes-Picot: Effective Administration

The enormous growth of violence in the sizable territories of Syria and Iraq, Libya and Yemen and the fact that this violence is now the basis for an entire system of socio-political relations are directly related to the fragmentation of societies, national identity crises, and the actualisation of the old social splits and the formation of new ones. But the political reason must be attributed to the destruction of the Sykes-Picot system.

This system that took shape in the colonial era, was based on a combination of Western administration with partially modernised, albeit still largely

traditional, social structures and a diversified economy. This inevitably led to the preservation of both traditional identities and social contradictions, and eventually gave way to the gradual aggravation of social splits.

From the very start the Sykes-Picot Agreement was a time bomb, the ticking of which we have not been able to stop in a hundred years.

A strong government machine was able to curtail this social fragmentation for a certain period of time, but the imbalances of institutional development were gradually reducing people's resilience to challenges. Strong institutions of executive government and advanced technocracy were combined with the exclusive status of law enforcement agencies and weak bodies of judicial and legislative power, which lead to the almost complete absence of civil society and ultimately the general alienation of citizens from the political process. As a result, these countries were incapable of adapting to growing political participation.

Events in the region, no matter whether they took place within the framework of state institutions, as in Egypt, Tunisia, or Morocco, or outside of it, as in Libya, involve traditional layers of the population into the political process, accordingly adapting political life to traditional patterns.

If the events develop under a soft scenario – without the destruction of state institutions – they may make the state more efficient in the future. If they unfold under a tough scenario, as in Libya, Syria, or Yemen, wider participation leads to the destruction or at least the degradation of statehood and any political actions are doomed to follow traditional pattern. Depending on the circumstances, this may lead to the growth of tribalism (as in Libya) or ethnic and religious tensions (as in Syria) or both (as in Yemen and Iraq).

The mounting role of personality is yet another consequence of these weakening institutions. Political leaders often turn into the only real carriers of sovereignty who are capable of making decisions in the event of an emergency situation, thereby making the ensuing events even less predictable. The same applies to the heads of non-government actors, such as political movements, parties, ethnic and religious communities, tribal chieftains and the like. Personal ambitions, a peculiar perception of reality, struggle for power and access to funds, and the actor striving to maintain his personal security all begin to play a certain role in the elaboration of a political strategy.

Pursuing the consolidation of government in parallel with civil society institutions and improving the efficiency of administration are becoming an urgent need for all countries of the region, and the only opportunity for ensuring their security in the future.

How can this be achieved and what role can the international community play in these processes? These questions still have to be answered. The US approach with its emphasis “on support for democracy” and the European accent on the defence of human rights usually boils down to the backing of opposi-

tion forces. At the same time, consolidation of statehood often comes down to the protection of the ruling regimes. It's therefore possible that key roles should be assigned not to individual non-regional actors but rather to international organisations, primarily the UN, and such structures as BRICS.

III. Bye-Bye Sykes-Picot: Redrawing Maps

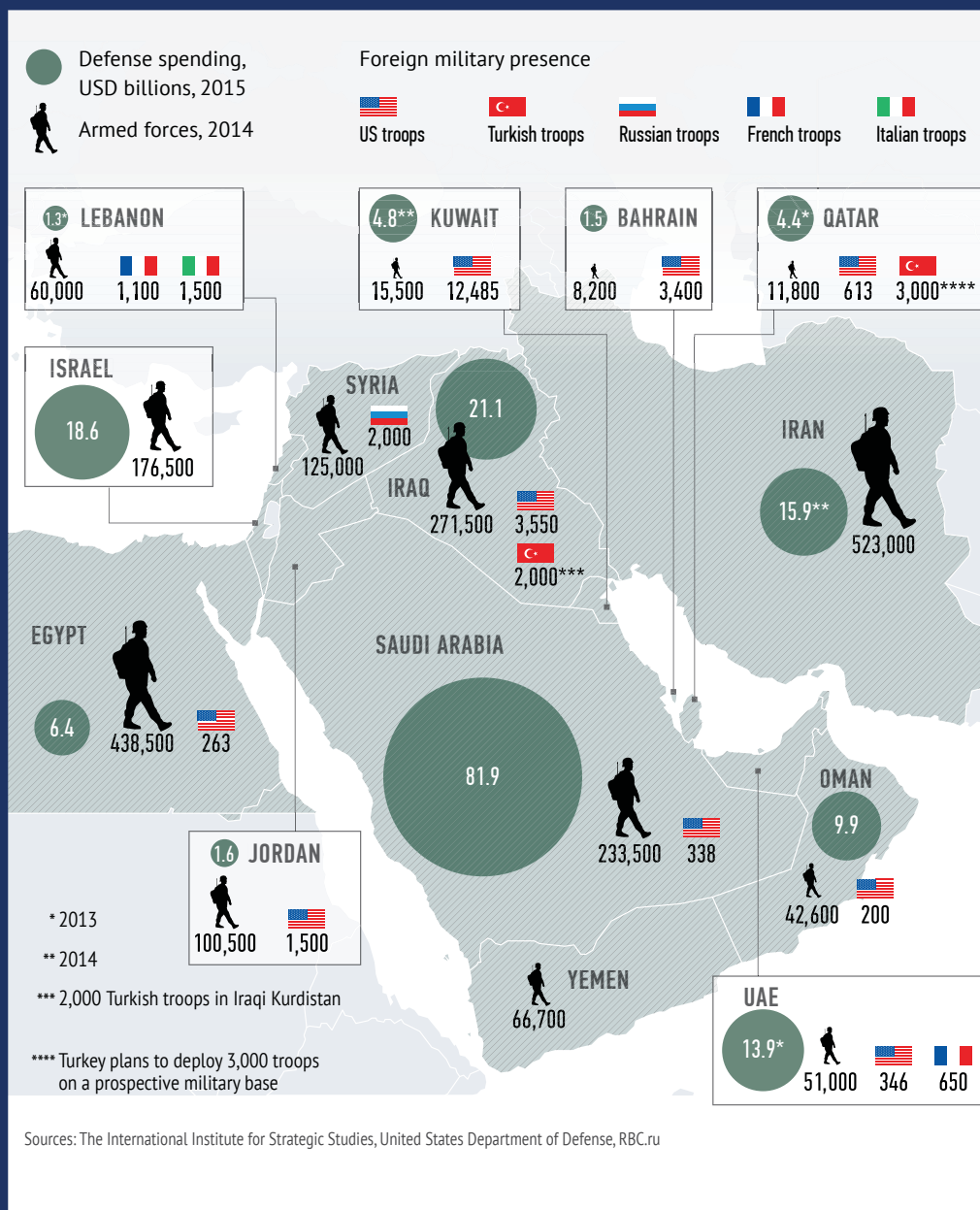
The Sykes-Picot system has one more dimension: it was an attempt to establish national states on the territory of historically fragmented countries that survived dual colonisation – Ottoman and European. The borders of these new states were formed, if not completely arbitrarily, then under the influence of accidental factors. As a result, it led to a deficit of legitimacy that is now inherent in the Arab political mentality. The existence of any state has never been viewed as absolutely natural and therefore can be called into doubt at any time.

At the same time the region has existed within these borders almost for a hundred years, during which new identities and specific political cultures have taken shape and socio-economic infrastructures have been built within the borders of actual national states.

Chaos is the only alternative to already established borders. Principle differences in the narratives of Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and other actors, including non-regional and nongovernmental ones, pose a very serious problem. The “wars of narratives” lead to the growth of regional tensions, thereby preventing key players from establishing dialogue and drafting a common image of the future Middle East.

Incidentally, global players have not yet formulated their strategic vision of the Middle East either. Without this vision it is impossible to slow down these negative developments. In the meantime, the region's countries may have very different visions for their future. Some politicians express crazy ideas in a bid to mend the shreds of the Middle Eastern fabric for lack of other alternatives. For instance, is it possible to de-centralise unitary states (if they cannot be preserved) along ethnic and religious lines? Won't it mean the revival of archaic concepts and the final renunciation of the national state concept that implies common values and identity for all ethnic and religious groups? How far can decentralisation be pursued? Given weak state and civil institutions, won't federalisation serve to camouflage the destruction of statehood? Or does it make sense to embrace concepts of democratic confederation and regional integration at the non-governmental level? Could the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and the ensuing complete change of political systems ensure stability in those countries of the region that have been ravaged by war the most?

MIDDLE EAST: MILITARY POWER AND FOREIGN MILITARY PRESENCE



IV. Economic Recovery – Mission Possible?

The regions mostly systemic economic development problems begin to play a special role in the described conditions. The risks involving food security are high: droughts, soil erosion and especially water shortages have become permanent factors capable of inciting conflict. In the next 30 years, the gap between the demand for water and renewable water resources will exceed 51 percent.

However, the difficulties caused by current political upheavals, wars, and terrorism may be exerting all but a bigger impact on the situation in the region. Last May the IMF registered Libya's balance of payment deficit in 2015 at 52.8 percent of its GDP and its budget deficit at 68.2 percent of its GDP, the relevant figures for Iraq being 9.6 percent and 10 percent, respectively. Hundreds of billions of dollars and several years of hard work will be required just to restore Syria's destroyed housing and infrastructure.

It is uncertain whether Arab oil exporters would like and would be able to play a key role in the economic recovery of civil war-destroyed countries. Oil exporters are experiencing serious drops in revenues from oil sales and this is a potential problem for the region. Thus, in May 2015 the IMF assessed the currency losses of the members of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf at \$287 billion (or 21 percent of their aggregate GDP), estimated on the basis of their potential revenues in October 2014. In October 2015 the IMF forecasted the loss of the Saudi Arabia budget up to 21.6 percent of its GDP for 2015 and 19.6 percent of its GDP in 2016.

The oil importers that have survived the political transformation relatively well, primarily Egypt and Tunisia, still have to overcome their economic crises. Acts of terror in both countries have already ruined tourism markets and reduced inbound investment. As a result, a new wave of political destabilisation swept Tunisia in 2016.

Thus, the elaboration of a roadmap for the economic recovery of Middle Eastern states in the post-conflict period and measures for ensuring the region's economic security are becoming yet another urgent task for the international community.

China and other BRICS countries' involvement in the economic recovery of severely weakened MidEastern states and the subsequent development of new production facilities that will employ younger generations may create new opportunities.

It is also worth thinking about the creation of regional institutions capable of consolidating mutual economic interdependence in the region and on the basis of existing structures – the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Arab League and the afore-mentioned Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf – or via the formation of new ones. It is also possible to consider the integration of some Mid-Eastern states into the associations of adjacent

regions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Expansion of the boundaries of free trade areas could promote trust. Finally, can the global actors draft a new Marshall Plan for the Middle East?

V. Against Terrorism – Together and Apart

The revitalisation of the activities of non-governmental actors, which deprived state agencies of their monopoly on violence, has become a highly important factor in the undermining of stability and a consequence of it at the same time. All kinds of ethnic, political, religious, and tribal groups have entrenched themselves on the ruins of statehood, weakening the remaining structures in the process.

DAESH has occupied a special place among terrorist organisations. Not a single terrorist group could compete with it in ideological, propaganda, financial, and military activities. Moreover, the weakening of statehood has made the idea of a caliphate particularly attractive. Ideologists have set forth this path because it could help them resolve many current problems. DAESH has turned archaic ideas into a foothold that the population needs, particularly in an uncertain situation, and has formulated for the people strategic goals, which give them the feeling of being on a mission and, those who needed it most of all, now sense that they were chosen. Their ideological appeal and their large territorial presence in Iraq and Syria have enabled DAESH to go beyond the bounds of a regular terrorist organisation that usually has a limited number of fighters, no territorial base or direct support in the parts of the world where it does not conduct its destructive activities. In a globalised world, DAESH has come to be perceived as a universal threat despite its civilisation-related limitations.

Terrorism that uses the enormous technological potentials of the modern world poses the greatest threat to peace and stability. It crosses borders with relative ease, sowing seeds of destruction and fear. The main task of terrorist organisations in the Middle East is to deal blows at everything that does not fit into their archaic concepts of social interaction and social relations.

Russia is particularly sensitive to extremism and terrorism because both have a domestic dimension for Russia. Its history abounds in manifestations of terrorism. Russia is considered to be the homeland of “systemic terrorism” that emerged in the latter half of the 19th century. More recently the growth of the terrorist threat in Russia was primarily linked with the war in Chechnya. However, extremists are still finding supporters among Russia’s multi-million Muslim population. In official estimates alone, 2,719 Russian citizens left for Syria, including 900 from Dagestan, 500 from Chechnya, 130 from Kabardino-Balkaria and 200 from the Volga Region.

Although terrorism has a relatively long history, it does not yet have a definition that would reflect all of its aspects and be accepted at the international level. Super high politicisation of the issue of terrorism complicates the search for consensus on the status of individual organisations. The Syrian opposition is a graphic example of the above.

Military methods have always been given priority in counter-terrorist activities. The struggle against DAESH is also mostly oriented to military actions because of its activities and territorial claims. At the same time a broad coalition has not been created and if American ground troops start fighting for Mosul and Raqqa, serious changes are likely to take place in the balance of forces. Better coordination of efforts between the United States and Russia and regional participants of both coalitions may not necessarily be the result of such developments.

The political process in Syria would help not only to find compromise between the key players on the Syrian political field but would also build up trust between the main external and regional actors, essential for countering DAESH. This will create an opportunity of cooperation between law enforcement and security agencies.

Soft forms of the anti-terrorist struggle, including ideological and economic ones, begin to play a special role. Their goal is to unite the world's Muslim community, including Russia's Muslims who have the unique experience of peaceful coexistence with other religious groups in a multireligious and multi-ethnic state.

VI. Global Games of Regional Players

Practically all conflicts in the Middle East are trending towards fast internationalisation. Military interference attracts special attention to the role of global powers, which seem to be increasing their impact on the regional situation, thereby reducing the influence of regional players. However, in reality, the increasing involvement of global forces in the confrontation in the Middle East has not only succeeded in not marginalising regional players (including non-governmental ones) but has also prompted Mid-Eastern countries to take more responsibility for reformatting the region. Indicatively, far from coinciding, their approaches to this task often rule out each other.

Every leading power has its own national interests that often contradict the interests of other regional and global forces. Complicated relations between Iran and the Gulf countries, the Arab states and Israel, Iran and Turkey, have a long history over the span of which it is not difficult to find various acute crises. Today, Iran and Turkey – the peripheral states – have become more active and this has led to the emergence of new confrontation lines.

Key regional players have no experience in building modern institutions (Israel is the only exception, but its model is not in great demand due to the persisting Palestinian issue). This is why they resort to military force in resetting the region. Soft power instruments are being replaced with traditional, ethnic, religious, tribal, or dynasty-related relations and commitments.

Rapid development of any tensions into armed clashes or, at best brinkmanship, is becoming a distinctive feature of the situation in the region. Numerous long-standing hot conflicts lower the threshold for resorting to violence against a background of the general increase in the global level of military confrontation. The activities of some radical organisations and even government bodies bear this out.

The balance of forces between regional and global powers is also subject to change. Realising the limits of their own potential, regional actors are still interested in relying on their global partners. However, growing ambitions and the stakes in regional fighting compel them to use the power and influence of global players in their own interests. During the Cold War, the region's countries involved in conflicts were actively drawing their global allies into conflicts the latter had nothing to do with. The rivalry for the collapsing Middle East, which is focused on the struggle for a new or the old world order, is again making the leading powers vulnerable to the influence of regional players.

The old regional associations, such as the Arab League or the Gulf Council, are unable to resolve increasingly complicated regional problems, and this leads to attempts to replace them with new coalitions. Such attempts are motivated by considerations of expediency rather than a striving for concerted effort. Thus, the Saudi-established Islamic coalition that unites more than 40 countries in the struggle against DAESH has not been fully institutionalised. States that are not part of it are considered the coalition anti-Shia.

The cooperation of regional and global forces in the Middle East goes beyond regional significance. It concerns the elaboration of agreed-upon and more coherent rules of the game that would exclude the crossing of the response threshold, armed action or the absence of an alternative. This is achievable at the negotiating table with the participation of interested parties, not only as regards individual conflicts, but also the general development strategy in the Middle East and the future of its nations.

VII. A Wonderful New World?

The situation in the region is similar to the events in Europe during the Thirty Years' War in Europe and two world wars. In all three cases the fear of the repetition of mass-scale violence and the ensuing doomsday as its result

compelled Europe to ponder over the rules and institutions for regulating international relations. Despite the urgency of the situation in the Middle East, it is essential to discuss today measures for overcoming tensions and ensuring regional security.

In the last few years conflicts in the Middle East have acquired an increasingly greater hybrid nature, combining “official” inter-state clashes with a civil war. Many conflicts are asymmetrical because the sides have different capabilities and potentials. Some states are confronted by individual groups and movements that are using their own methods of inflicting damage, including terrorism. A special role belongs to external armed interference, the use of which is most often at odds with international law.

Both relatively recent hotbeds of tensions (in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen) and those that were inherited from the Cold War and the bipolar world – the Palestinian-Israeli and Western Sahara conflicts, are considered hybrid and asymmetrical.

Each new conflict creates a threat to the security of neighbour countries. Being the epicentre of regional tensions, armed actions in Syria, Yemen, and Libya are becoming a factor of imbalance for the entire Middle East. Despite its long stagnation, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is still a stumbling block for the region’s countries because it complicates the formation of a regional security system. Furthermore, it continues to inspire radical anti-Western political forces. The consolidation of the network-like infrastructure of these conflicts – financial, information, and logistic ties between their parties – is creating yet another problem.

Attempts to stop or settle these conflicts include either armed intervention with a view to changing the alignment of forces or the search for political solutions – organisation of national dialogue, elaboration of a roadmap that details a sequence of steps towards settlement, collective international mediation, and initiatives of individual states.

To form a general regional security system it is necessary to rule out unilateral armed action without the relevant mandate and in violation of international legal standards. Addressing the issue of regional security, including Russia’s concept of creating an area free of weapons of mass destruction, demands that its framework, main tasks and parameters all be redefined. The already available definitions need to be updated so that they can be combined with those approaches that to a larger degree take into account the modern dynamic of the on-going military-political processes in the Middle East.

The traditional question of what to do in a deteriorating situation requires non-traditional replies. It is necessary to do the following:

- *Use the opportunity to introduce external administration in a state that has collapsed and is unable to provide physical and social protection for its citizens. This answer suggests other questions: Under what aegis?*

Utilising what resources? What role will be played by global and regional organisations?

- *Establish bodies of government that will be able to regulate cultural diversity and prevent the transition to political rivalries in case of autonomy or federalisation.*
- *Prevent the re-drawing of borders by force, render international assistance and grant international guarantees for a “civilised divorce” wherever the change of borders has already taken place or has become inevitable.*
- *Launch negotiations for creating a regional security system in the Middle East under the Helsinki pattern.*

The Middle East in a time of troubles : traumas of the past and challenges of the future

Moscow, August 2016

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The report develops the discussion which took place at the Club’s conference “The Middle East: from violence to security” (February 25–26, 2016)

- The Middle East¹ today epitomizes major global trends: international processes becoming more ungovernable, the resurgence of power as a factor in international relations, the greater role played by contingency, the world's periphery and semi-periphery gaining in strength amid a crisis in the concept of the nation state and national identity.
- The region has been transformed over the last five years, giving rise to trends that pose a threat to the whole world: the weakening or destruction of state institutions, bloody civil wars, conflicts escalating and spilling over into neighboring territories, humanitarian crises, the spread of terrorism evolving into a global threat.
- New alliances have replaced the old ones in the reformatted system within the region.
- Systemic efforts to influence developments in the Middle East from the outside have not succeeded so far, as the actions of non-Arab countries within the region are viewed as a security challenge for the governing elites.
- Overall, many countries in the Middle East are ready for progressive change, but intolerance within these societies and attempts by outside forces to accelerate ongoing processes proved counterproductive.
- Countries within the region are not ready to expand political participation due to persisting imbalances in governance systems.
- In areas with no state authority, weak governments have to contend with violent non-state actors that are becoming increasingly powerful and assuming some of the administrative and economic functions of the state. Rampant militarization has made competitive violence the dominant form of socio-political interaction.
- The role of individuals has gained in importance: often political and military leaders are the only people able to uphold sovereignty within the territories under their control.
- The legitimacy deficit of modern states is the prevailing idea in Arab political thinking.
- Keeping countries within their borders does not necessarily mean that their administrative or territorial structure should also remain unchanged.
- Before the crisis broke out, all the indicators showed that the Middle East was on track to produce an economic miracle.
- Rebuilding war-ravaged countries is above all the responsibility of the international community and primarily regional actors, who have the greatest interest in normalizing the situation in neighbouring countries.
- The overarching political and economic objective for the Arab countries is to make sure that their populations do not feel marginalized by allowing legitimate participation in the political economy of their nations.
- The prerequisites for building a security framework in the Middle East are economic rehabilitation of Mid-East countries recovering from conflicts, returning

¹ In this article, the Middle East is defined as extending from Iran in the east to Morocco in the west.

the socioeconomic landscape to normal and facilitating economic development with assistance from the international community.

- When Arab governments failed to respond effectively to instability and uncertainty, aggressive non-state actors were empowered to seize the monopoly on violence from state actors. Advances in modern technology have allowed such groups to rapidly proliferate.
- Daesh¹ has grown into more than just another terrorist organization. It has expanded its footprint across the region and beyond with a backward-looking worldview and ideology that appeals to some Muslims.
- Russia regards the fusion of modern-day terrorism with state-of-the-art technology as the most serious threat to peace and stability.
- Russia is currently viewed in the region as being the most consistent and effective force fighting Daesh.
- The fact that global and regional players are working toward differing political ends in the Middle East not only undermines efforts to create a broad coalition, despite a shared formal commitment to fighting international terrorism, but also wastes military power and creates potential risks.
- Launching a political process in Syria could enhance trust between the key external and regional players, as well as facilitate a compromise among the key political actors in Syria.
- Every major power in the Middle East has its own national interests that run counter to those of other regional and global players.
- Regional actors mostly rely on military force, while soft power only extends to traditional ties and commitments, be they ethnic, religious, tribal, or dynastic.
- The Syrian conflict showed that global actors such as Russia and the US have for the most part maintained their ability to influence events in the region and are generally capable of productive interaction.
- Leaders attempting to achieve purely self-interested goals have a much greater ability to destabilize international relations than ever before, further undermining mutual trust.
- Leaders of global powers should make political decisions based on a more careful analysis of expert opinion on the region, local cultures and history.
- Russia's interests in the Middle East are dictated by security concerns and maintaining its status as a global power capable of conducting an independent foreign policy.
- Russia should be credited with launching a political process in Syria, helping to stabilize the country and improve relations with global powers.

¹ There are several names used in the report to refer to the same organization. The names such as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), IS (Islamic State), Daesh (the Arabic abbreviation of the same name) are equally in use and there is no generally accepted standard. Whatever name is used to refer to this group, it is designated a terrorist organization and prohibited on the territory of Russian Federation. – *Ed. note.*

- The ability to produce tension is one of the defining features of regional actors in the Middle East.
- In recent years, conflicts in the Middle East have increasingly taken the form of hybrid warfare, blending interstate hostilities between regular armies with civil wars.
- The parties to these conflicts are developing network infrastructures by improving financial, informational and logistical ties. This is a matter of particular concern.
- The lack of understanding among regional and external forces as to the rules of interaction during conflicts, attempts to act unilaterally, disregard for international norms and a predisposition to use force on every occasion, taken together, create serious obstacles to international efforts to deescalate conflicts.
- The policy of overthrowing authoritarian regimes in the name of democracy is discredited by recent developments. A strict set of reciprocal commitments could offer an alternative and, with support from external forces, prevent actors in the Middle East from using military force.
- Unilateral action would have to be forbidden under any common security framework. The same goes for military intervention by foreign powers in violation of international law.
- Regional issues, such as the lack of a security framework, mass unemployment, the need to reform healthcare and education systems, should be addressed all at once without prioritizing any one problem.
- There is cause for hope in the Middle East.

I. Situation in the Middle East

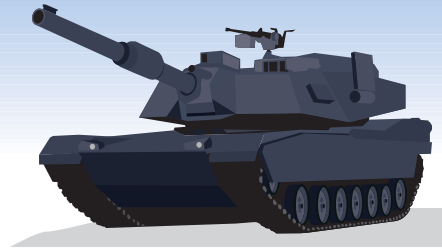
The wave of protests that swept through Arab countries resulted in a tectonic shift in the Middle East by completely reshaping the system of cultural, social, economic and political relations within the region.

Although experts tend to agree that this transformation was mainly attributable to internal factors, the jury is still out on which were the most important ones. While some point to socioeconomic development as the main cause of the imbalances in the regions (poverty, corruption, unemployment, and the youth bulge), others tend to attach greater importance to political and psychological issues (authoritarian rule, relative deprivation, etc.) or sociopolitical ones, such as lack of social mobility.

Viewed from a regional perspective, the ongoing processes are clearly intertwined with the most alarming global trends. In fact, the Middle East epitomizes these trends: international processes becoming more ungovernable, the resurgence of power as a factor in international relations, the greater role played by contingency,

MIDDLE EAST – WORLD'S LARGEST ARMS MARKET

The US, Canada, France and the UK are the main exporters of defense equipment to the Middle East and beneficiaries of the spending boom



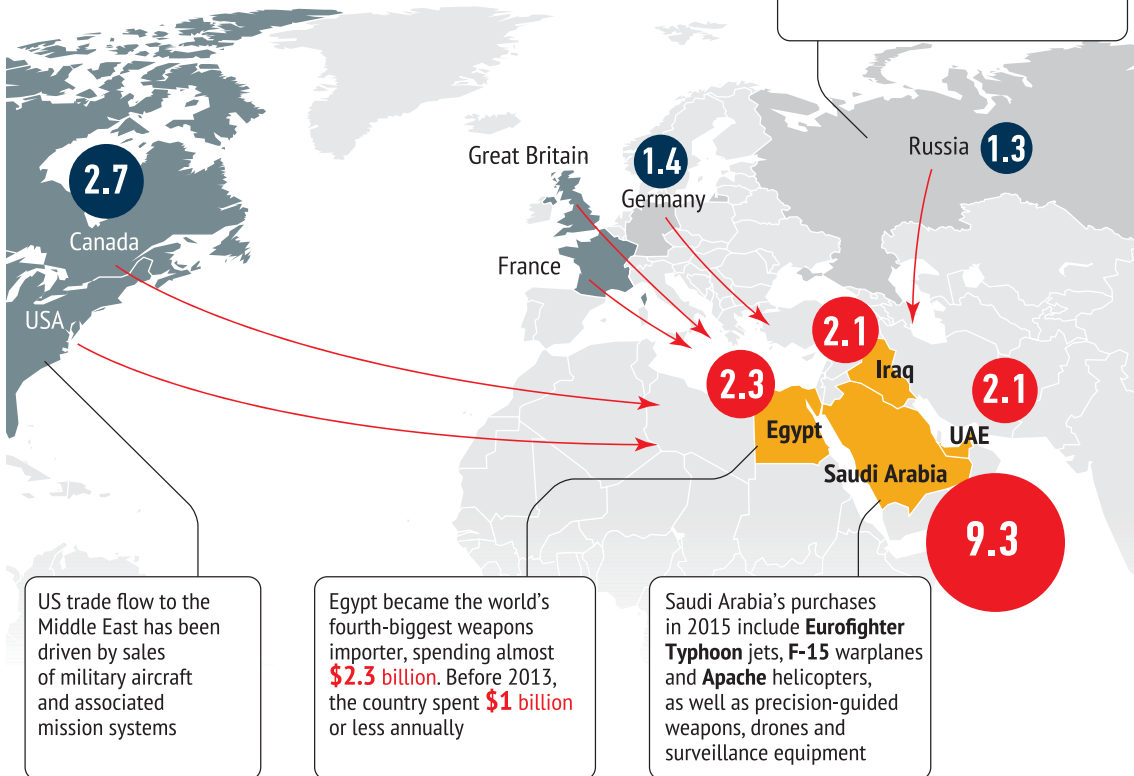
Top Defense Exporters to the Middle East

Top Defense Importers in the Middle East

Armaments import by Middle East countries (in billions USD, 2015)

Armaments Export to the Middle East Countries (in billions USD, 2015)

Russia is likely to increase its trade in the region as post-sanctions Iran begins to replace its exhausted aviation assets. The volume of orders can reach **40-60 billion USD**



Source: HS Jane's the Annual Global Defense Trade Report, Bloomberg

the world's periphery and semi-periphery gaining in strength amid a crisis in the concept of the nation state and national identity.

Unfortunately, so far the outcomes of the ongoing transformation have been quite alarming.

It is true that in some countries political participation has expanded, political systems were modernized and there was some turnover among elites. A number of Arab communities have recognized the need for reform and are finding creative solutions to deal with new threats and challenges. **However, the objective outcome of this period of transformation so far has been the weakening and sometimes destruction of state institutions in a number of countries, civil wars leaving hundreds of thousands dead, conflicts escalating and spilling over into neighboring territories, humanitarian crises, the spread of terrorism, and the rise of Daesh as a global threat.**

New alliances have replaced the old ones in the reformatted system of international relations within the region. With state authority declining in certain areas, non-state actors are becoming increasingly powerful. In some cases they pursue their own agenda, while in others they serve as agents of outside forces. Countries devastated by civil war have become battlegrounds of proxy wars.

Through Chaos Toward a New Kind of Stability

The transformation process is incomplete on all levels; it has not even reached its apex. The contours of the future regional framework have not taken shape yet, and the old system has not been uprooted. That is why the current pessimistic outlook on the Middle East may be premature. Profound political transformations can take a decade or even longer, as demonstrated by the history of the 20th century. The old system must be dismantled, resulting in a period of chaos that paves the way to a new kind of stability.

For all the chaotic nature of the current situation in the region, some stable trends can be distinguished in its development.

First and foremost, the transformation processes have revealed a certain introversion of the Middle East region even as countries within the region drift further apart.

Even the states that at certain stages attempted to merge into various regional sub-systems (European, Mediterranean or otherwise) are increasingly forced to focus on the Middle Eastern agenda. At the same time, **systemic efforts to influence developments in the Middle East from the outside have been unsuccessful.**

There is still a huge divide between Arab and non-Arab countries. In their quest for regional leadership, Iran and Turkey are becoming increasingly active in the Arab world, relying on local actors and trying to manipulate specific ethnic and religious groups. Many Arab regimes view efforts by non-Arab regional powers as a security challenge.

Four Levels of Resilience

Experts taking part in the Valdai Club's Middle East Conference divided Arab countries into four groups in terms of their resilience to the current challenges and threats: afflicted by civil war, fragile, vulnerable and stable.

The first group includes Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Important parts of those countries are controlled by non-state forces, and government institutions lost much, if not all, of their power. In Libya, the revolution destroyed the fragile political system that Muammar Gaddafi built over the years, and real power was seized by paramilitary militia groups, especially in Tripolitania. In Yemen, despite a disruption of traditional interreligious, intertribal and interregional balances, the modern parties continued to coexist with traditional social and religious communities. As a result, while in Libya political settlement in the near terms appears quite problematic, for the simple reason that there are no institutions to promote it, in Yemen the process could be resumed with support from outside players, despite a failed attempt at national dialogue.

In Syria, government institutions have not been destroyed, and the state authorities proved that they are able to manage territories under their control quite effectively even amid a bloody war. There are also moderate opposition groups, although some have cooperated with terrorist groups. The latter remain active despite heavy losses and still control part of the country's territory.

Finally, the civil war waged by ISIS originated in Iraq and spilled over into Syria, but now seems to be migrating back. However, interreligious strife has not threatened the Iraqi state despite all the issues with the country's federalization.

Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon can be identified as fragile states.

The first two countries have lived through the Arab Spring uprisings, but failed to effect profound political overhaul and lack experience in promoting democratic change, and their governance systems remain inefficient. The main danger in terms of government stability come from unresolved socioeconomic issues, mass opposition movements being excluded from the political process, and terrorist groups, both of local and foreign origin.

Lebanon and Jordan were quite successful in overcoming domestic protest movements, but could still be destabilized by refugees from Syria and Iraq, who now account for 25 percent of the population in Lebanon and 20 percent in Jordan. Lebanon has found itself in a particularly challenging situation, since on top of that it faces a protracted political crisis.

Vulnerable countries are those that were successful in overcoming the challenges of the Arab Spring through effective government action or by leveraging abundant financial resources, but could still be destabilized. Primarily this applies to Algeria and Saudi Arabia. Given that the latter dominates the Persian Gulf region, it is obvious that unrest in this country could spell disaster for oth-

er Gulf monarchies, particularly Kuwait and Bahrain, which had already seen mass protest movements back in 2011.

Finally, experts regard Morocco as a stable state, arguing that its political system has proved resilient to various internal and external challenges, absorbing new shocks by blending traditional political authority with a modern competitive multi-party system. Although Morocco still faces many challenges, including corruption, unemployment, the complex situation involving Western Sahara, the country has not faced any serious threats so far.

Overall, many countries in the Middle East are ready for progressive change, but intolerance within these societies and attempts by outside forces to accelerate ongoing processes proved counterproductive.

II. Institutions and the Economy

There are several factors behind the rapid escalation of violence, which has become a systemic element of sociopolitical relations in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Egypt. From a social perspective, the growth of violence is related to the identity crisis these nations are undergoing, the reopening of old divisions in society and the emergence of new ones. Politically, the scale of violence increased due to the erosion of the structure of states in the region. These states, which formed during the colonial era, combined a Western system of government with a partially modernized but mostly traditional social structure and a mixed economy. This combination helped preserve traditional identities and freeze social contradictions in place, but ultimately increased social fragmentation in the region.

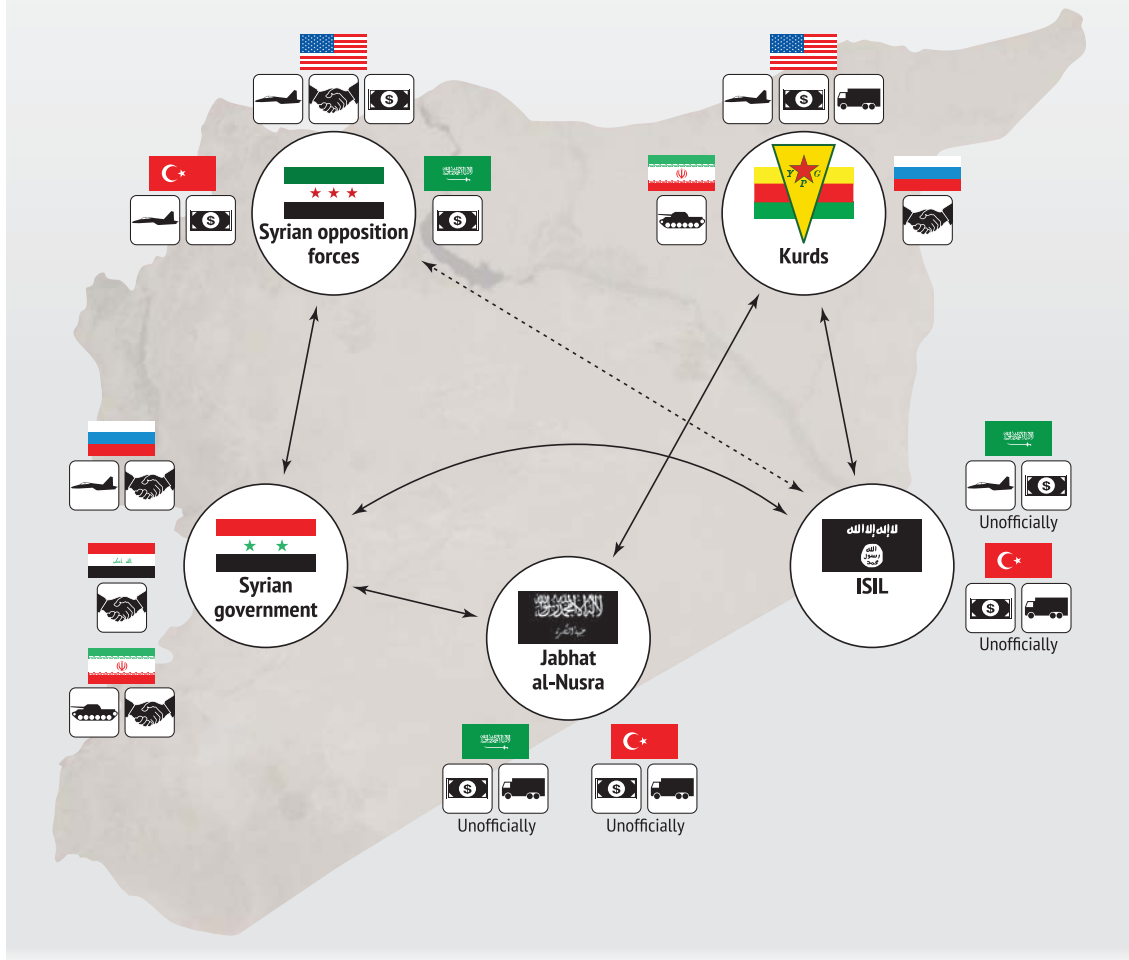
The forces of social fragmentation were held in check by strong governments, but imbalances in the institutional structure of these states gradually eroded the governments' capacity to confront new challenges. These imbalances stem from a combination of strong institutions of executive power and a highly developed technocratic bureaucracy, an exclusive role for security bodies, and weak judicial and legislative branches, as well as the nearly complete absence of civil society and the public's overall detachment from the political process.

As a result of this asymmetry, these governments were unable to open up political participation, the need for which was becoming increasingly apparent in modernizing societies where new forms of education had led to the partial acceptance of Western values. It is telling that the growth of living standards in many Arab countries in the 1990s and 2000s was accompanied by the emergence of civil society institutions, including NGOs and volunteer organizations, which more than doubled in number from 1995 to 2007.

WHO IS FIGHTING WHOM IN SYRIA

Parties to the Syrian conflict and powers they are supported by

OPPOSING FORCES	SUPPORT COMES FROM:			FORMS OF SUPPORT	
All-out military confrontation —————→ Partial military confrontation ·····→	 Russia	 Iraq	 Iran	 Military	 Diplomatic
	 USA and its allies	 Turkey	 Saudi Arabia and Gulf states	 Financial	 Logistical



Expanding Political Participation

Recent developments in the region, both within an institutional framework (Egypt, Tunis and Morocco) and outside of one (Libya), demonstrate that traditional social groups are becoming politically active, resulting in the politics of these countries becoming more archaic.

When state institutions are not being undermined, this change can eventually increase the effectiveness of the state. But as was seen in Libya, Syria and Yemen, the growth of political participation in society can also lead to the destruction or, at least, the degradation of the state and, ultimately, bring about more traditional form of politics. Depending on the situation, traditional can mean tribal (Libya), ethno-religious (Syria), or a combination of the two (Yemen and Iraq).

The destruction of state institutions and economic primitivization, as in Fezzan and to some degree Tripolitania in Libya, or in the interior regions of Syria and Iraq, sometimes reduces sociopolitical relations to fighting over the most readily available resources. Therefore, political processes underway there can be described in terms of potestary societies, or pre-class societies that have no political or social institutions.

Competitive Violence as the Basis of Relations

Weak governments and strong opposition groups come into conflict in regions where the state has withered away, usually located in the country's interior. The need to interact transforms both governments and opposition groups in strange ways. Non-state actors have to resort to mimicry, acting like states and assuming some state functions. The Islamic State (Daesh) is the most prominent but far from only example of such mimicry, which can be also found in South Arabia, Sinai, Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan, Kabylia and Sahara, as well as the desert area of Anbar Province and the whole of the Levant.

This process is accompanied by militarization. The state's tactics and strategy are reduced to the logic and ideology of a militia, and they become as violent as the armed rebel groups. The government goes from being the supreme arbiter capable of resisting or managing non-state actors to just one of the parties to these complex relations. As a result, **competitive violence becomes the key principle of sociopolitical interaction. Considering the large-scale proliferation of weapons, this primitivization of sociopolitical relations allows nearly any organized group to declare itself as a separate political and economic entity.**

Moreover, the role of individuals is becoming more important with the weakening of state institutions. Political leaders often are the only true defenders of sovereignty capable of taking action in emergencies, which only makes the situation more unpredictable. The greater role played by individuals applies not only to legitimate heads of state but also the heads of various non-state

actors such as political movements, parties, ethno-religious communities, tribes, clans, etc. Political strategies are primarily informed by personal ambition, the leader's interpretation of the situation, the struggle for power and access to financial resources, and the leader's personal safety.

In light of this, all countries in the region must strengthen civil society and government institutions, and govern more effectively as a precondition for maintaining security in the future.

Legitimacy Deficit in the Region

The system that was developed in the Middle East in the 1920s through the 1950s, and which is now conventionally regarded as a product of the Sykes-Picot agreement, represented an attempt to create nation states in the territories that survived double colonization – the Ottoman (of the 16th – 20th centuries), and the European one (of the interwar period between the end of World War I and the start of World War II). The borders of these new states were often guided by random, if not completely arbitrary, considerations. There has always been room to question the validity of these states. The leading elites in Arab countries either seized power or received it from the colonizers, with the exception of the monarchical dynasties in Jordan and Morocco. These factors explain the deficit of legitimacy which has dominated the Arab political mentality for the past decades.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the region had lived within these borders for nearly a century, during which time new identities, cultures and socio-economic infrastructure developed within the boundaries of these nation states.

The only alternative to remaining within established borders is complete anarchy.

However, **keeping countries within their borders does not necessarily mean that their administrative or territorial structure should also remain unchanged.** Obviously, democratization and broader political participation in many of these states will also take on a geographical dimension, leading to their decentralization and possibly even federalization, like in Iraq. Although nearly all Arab governments accept the need for decentralization in one form or another, this process definitely entails major difficulties. Economic development, even within the most prosperous countries in the Middle East, the simultaneous existence of several types of economic management, modernization gaps between different segments of the population, the existence of localized ethno-religious groups and other factors can spur disintegration trends in countries with a weak civil society and a weak central government. As a result, the issue of territorial integrity can be reduced to access to national resources, primarily financial, for elite groups that represent different regions of the country.

In this situation, the government can yield to the temptation of formal decentralization, without delegating real powers to the regions. But this is fraught with a new round of social tensions and can discredit government institutions.

GLOBAL OIL RESERVES

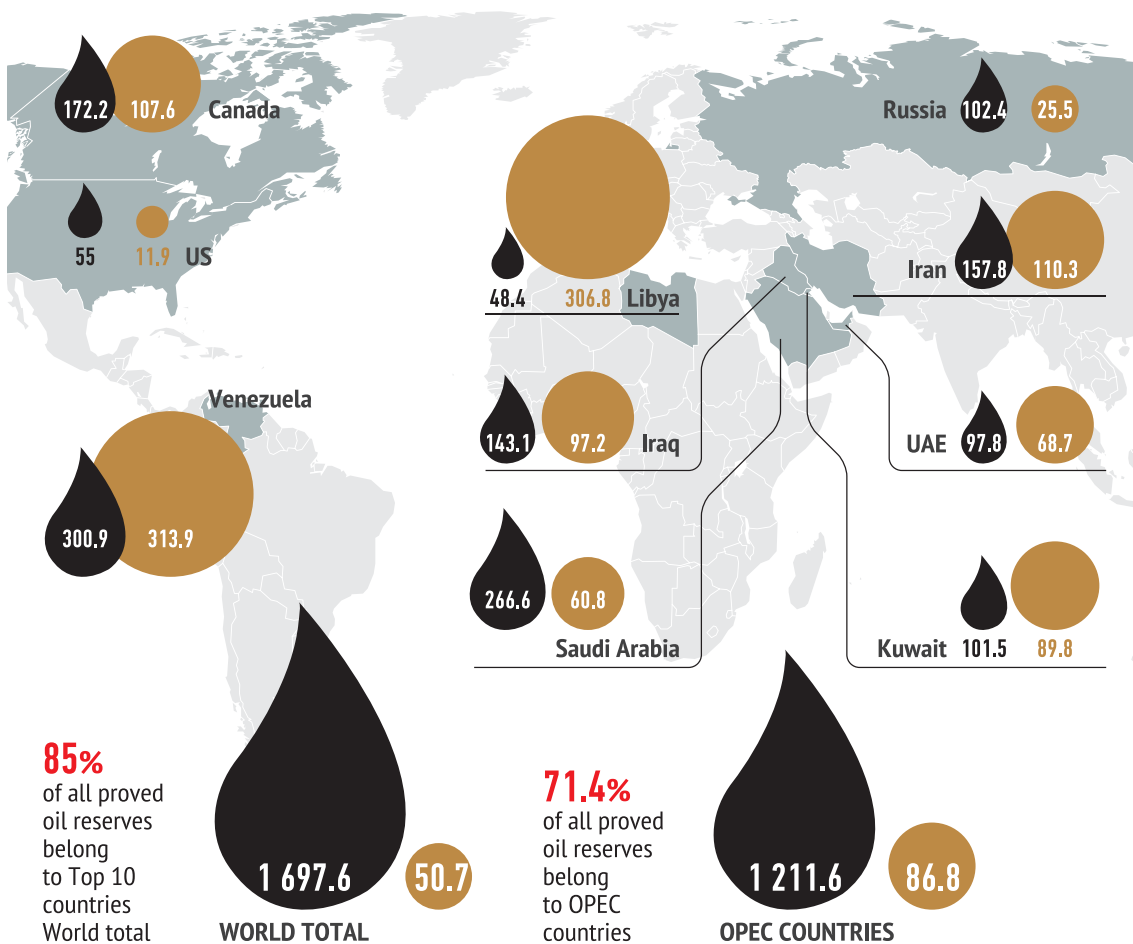
BP experts estimate that the world's proved oil reserves at 1 697.6 billion barrels at the end of 2015 would be enough for 50.7 years at current production and fuel consumption levels



TOP 10 COUNTRIES WITH PROVED OIL RESERVES

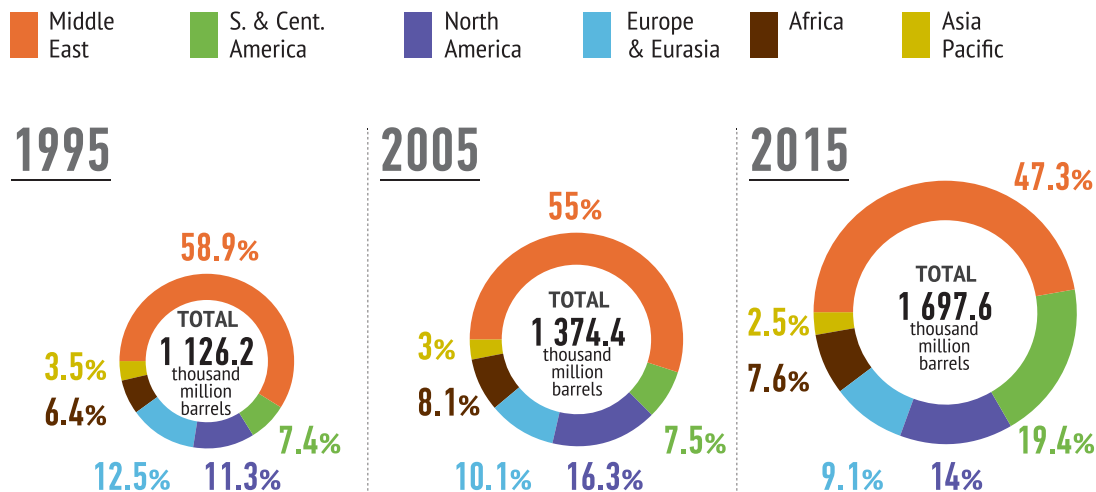
Proved reserves, end of 2015
(Thousand million barrels)

Reserves-to-production ratios,
2015 level



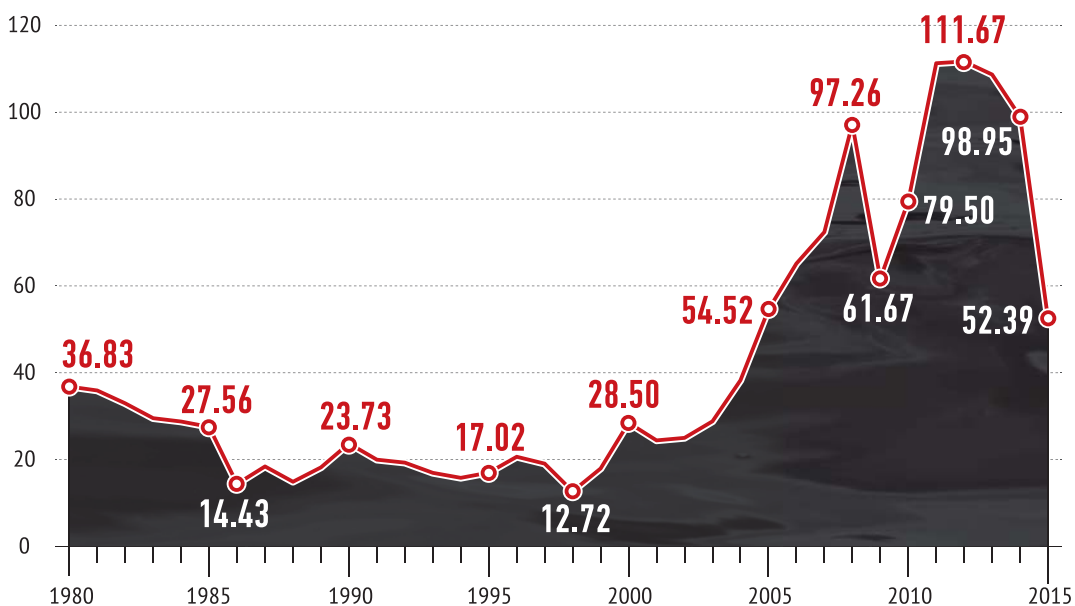
Source: www.bp.com

DISTRIBUTION OF PROVED RESERVES



Source: www.bp.com

SPOT CRUDE PRICES, BRENT, US DOLLARS PER BARREL*



*1980-1983 Forties, 1984-2015 Brent dated

Source: www.bp.com, Platts

Economic Development Problems

Economic development problems, many of which are of a systemic nature, are playing a major role in this context. For example, food security risks are growing, and droughts, soil erosion and water shortages have become factors driving conflict.

Despite these fundamental problems, the countries of the region were among the global leaders in economic growth and social improvement before the crisis. Before 2010, Oman, Israel, Tunis, Algeria, Morocco and Saudi Arabia were among the world's most successful states. Social and economic inequality and per capita murder rates decreased, and all the indicators showed that the Middle East was on track to produce an economic miracle.

Today, the situation in the region is most influenced by the challenges of political unrest, war and terrorism. In May 2015, the IMF assessed the balance of payments deficit at 52.8% of GDP and 68.2% of the national budget in Libya and at 9.6% and 10%, respectively, in Iraq.

Before the crisis, experts were forecasting that Syria's rapidly growing GDP would reach \$90 billion by 2015. But GDP growth gave way to contraction after the start of hostilities, which have cost Syria over \$250 billion. As of now, the Syrian economy is expected to return to pre-war levels no sooner than in 2025 under an optimistic scenario involving multibillion dollar investments and the creation of agencies to distribute funds, monitor their spending, and fight corruption.

Rebuilding war-ravaged countries is above all the responsibility of the international community and primarily regional actors, who have the greatest interest in normalizing the situation in neighbouring countries.

But it is unclear whether Arab oil exporting countries will be willing or able to play the leading role in the economic rehabilitation of these war-torn countries. One of the reasons for this uncertainty is their declining revenues.

The IMF estimated that oil export earnings in 2015 would be \$287 billion lower (21% of GDP) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries than was calculated when October 2014 oil prices were used. In October 2015, the IMF said it expected Saudi Arabia's budget deficit to peak at 21.6% of GDP in 2015 and to drop to 19.6% in 2016.

Another issue is the possibility of overcoming the ongoing economic crisis in the oil-importing countries that are undergoing a political transformation, primarily Egypt and Tunisia. The terrorist attacks there have all but destroyed the tourism industry and caused investment to plummet, unleashing a new wave of political instability in Tunisia in January 2016. As for Egypt, it is unclear whether the mega-projects announced by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi will alleviate the country's most painful problems, or whether Egypt will become economically dependent on foreign donors.

The ability of these countries to overcome their economic difficulties is directly connected to the stability of their institutional development and the struggle against extremism.

Socioeconomic Objectives

The radicalization of the population in these countries is based on feelings of injustice and deprivation, which undermine (if not completely erode) self-esteem, inspire thoughts of revenge, breed political detachment, and cause mistrust of the government. It is not surprising that there are so many Tunisians in the ranks of Daesh, or that terrorist activity is rampant in Egypt.

The root cause is not simply poverty, because the poverty rate in some African countries is much higher than in Arab countries, but rather the perception of socioeconomic and political marginalization relative to more modernized population groups. Mohamed Bouazizi and many other martyrs of the Arab Spring were small-time vendors who failed to integrate into their countries' legal economy or lacked political leaders who would represent their interests. A considerable percentage of young people who join Daesh in search of "justice" come from the same class. These people – who represent a large swathe of the economically active population – need comprehensive economic, social and political integration. In other words, they want to live in a society where their small businesses are not endangered by the state through security or tax authorities and other officials, but are protected as well as the businesses of elites.

Some experts believe that **bringing the shadow economy into the light and boosting economic development can be an effective means of deradicalization**. They cite the ideas of Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto and Peru's experience of fighting the ultra-left terrorist organization Sendero Luminoso.

The size of the shadow economy in the Arab countries cannot be reliably estimated, but it is believed that before the crisis it varied between 15–20 percent in GCC countries and 45–50 percent in the relatively prosperous non-oil-exporting countries. These figures have increased over the past years. Moreover, the **sectors of the shadow economy** (housing construction, transport, and the smuggling of foodstuffs, construction materials and fuel) **constitute the foundation of the economy** in some parts of even relatively prosperous countries, primarily border regions.

Therefore, the overarching political and economic objective for the Arab countries is to make sure that their populations do not feel marginalized by allowing legitimate participation in the political economy of their nations. This will also expand the tax base for socioeconomic restructuring.

As for international community, the drafting of a roadmap for the economic reconstruction in the post-conflict period, economic development measures, and socioeconomic normalization in the Middle East should be viewed as elements of a new security system in the region.

III. Terrorism in the Middle East

Aggressive Non-State Actors

The key contributing factor and consequence of instability has been the rise of non-state actors who usurp the right to violence from the state amid conditions of general instability.

All kinds of ethnic, political, confessional and tribal groups have grown stronger on the ruins of states and have continued to weaken them. A minor change in the traditional ethnic or religious balance of forces in government agencies (Iraq), the disruption of the balance between movement toward change and national stability as a result of external interference (the NATO operation in Libya), or the rapid internationalization of a civil war (Syria) – all these circumstances led to the emergence of terrorist groups and allowed them to grow stronger.

It is believed that **the number of non-state actors rose on the backs of technological innovations and weak governance**. Actually, non-state actors, including organizations that use terrorist methods, are not unlike startups, i.e. companies designed to rapidly develop a profitable business model. A clumsy government bureaucracy cannot compete with the non-state actors' influence in society.

Although terrorism has a long history, none of the existing definitions cover all aspects of terrorism or are accepted universally. The high degree of politicization hinders consensus on individual groups, as evidenced by the example of the Syrian opposition.

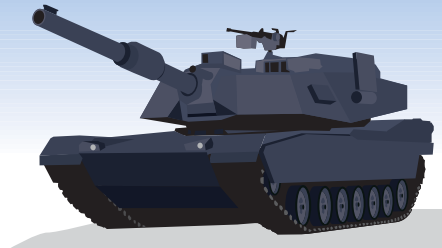
The Middle East has given rise to local groups that use terrorism to press society into serving their narrow interests, as well as to Islamic State (Daesh), whose proclaimed goal is to create a global alternative to the traditional state. Daesh is using both ethnic and religious nationalism, as well as confessionalism, to attain its objectives.

Daesh: Archaic Answers to Modern Challenges

No terrorist group can rival Daesh in the ideological, propaganda, financial and military aspects of their struggle. The weakening of regional states has strengthened the appeal of the caliphate, an idea proposed by Daesh ideologists as the answer to many modern challenges. Daesh ideologists have turned archaic views into a foothold, which people in the region badly needed amid the general uncertainty. They have strategic objectives, and offer a sense of mission and a feeling of being one of the chosen to those who need it. The ideological appeal and spread of Daesh in Iraq and Syria enabled it to break out the boundaries of an ordinary terrorist organization, which usually has a limited number of fighters and does not have any base on the ground or direct support in parts of the world where it does not practice its destructive trade.

MIDDLE EAST – WORLD'S LARGEST ARMS MARKET

The US, Canada, France and the UK are the main exporters of defense equipment to the Middle East and beneficiaries of the spending boom



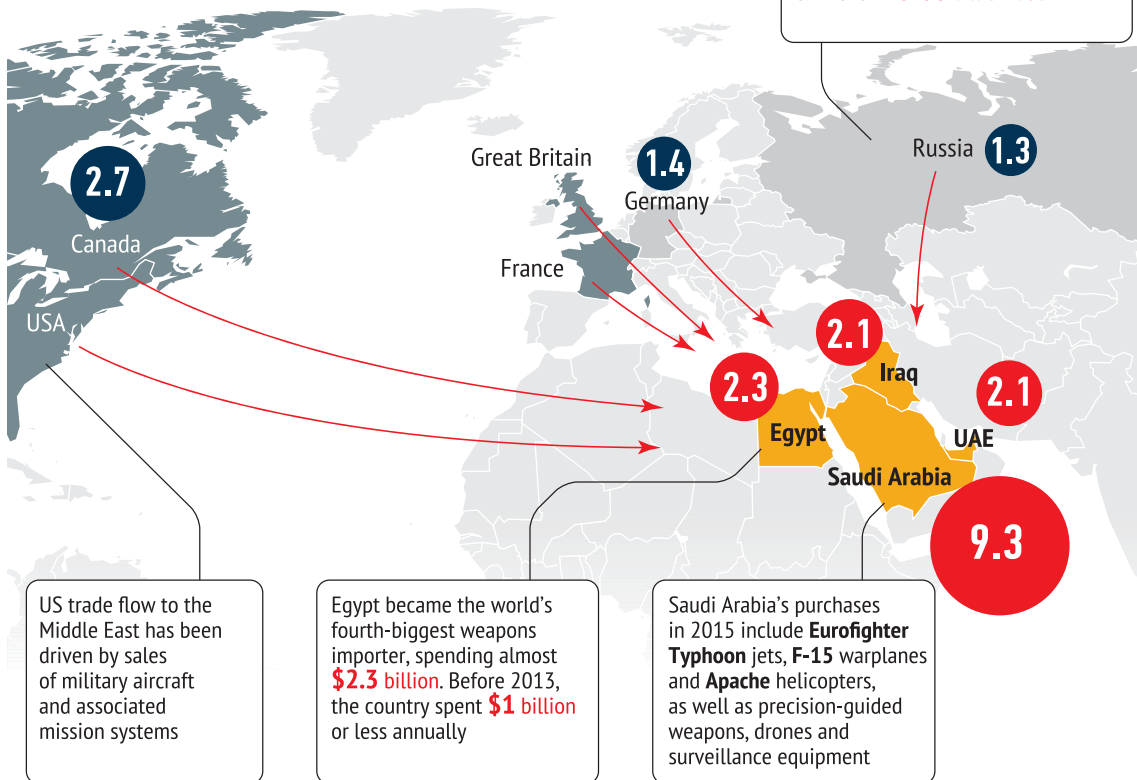
Top Defense Exporters to the Middle East

Top Defense Importers in the Middle East

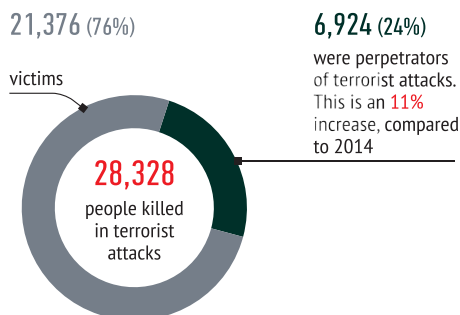
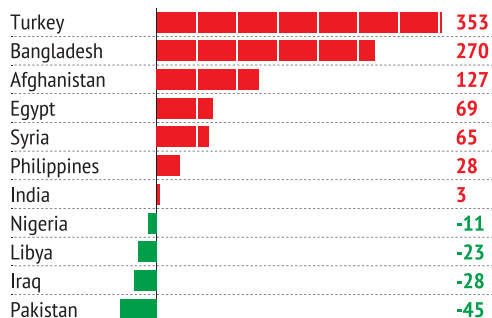
Armaments import by Middle East countries (in billions USD, 2015)

Armaments Export to the Middle East Countries (in billions USD, 2015)

Russia is likely to increase its trade in the region as post-sanctions Iran begins to replace its exhausted aviation assets. The volume of orders can reach **40-60 billion USD**



Source: HS Jane's the Annual Global Defense Trade Report, Bloomberg

KILLED IN TERRORIST ATTACKS IN 2015**TOTAL ATTACKS IN 2015, COMPARED TO 2014, %**

Sources: U.S. State Department (<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2015/257526.htm>), National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism

See also <http://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics>

Organizations that employ systemic terrorism have greatly changed over the past decade, and it appears that this process is not over yet. Modern jihadists have moved away from their radical leftwing predecessors, who did not have a broad network of terrorist cells or infrastructure and didn't have the capabilities to stage a horror movie in the center of the world's most highly advanced and powerful state, as al-Qaeda¹ did in the United States on September 11, 2001. Al-Qaeda used rather primitive methods, which nevertheless clearly demonstrated the frailty of modern civilization.

As al-Qaeda's successor, Daesh has offered a new agenda and new methods of attaining its goals. It is using violence to change society (the Islamist version of Che Guevara) and prepare it for the arrival of the global caliphate. In a globalized world, the challenge of Daesh is viewed as a universal threat despite its civilizational limitations. New forms of terrorism appeared and were incorporated in the hybrid forms of modern international development.

Daesh: a New Stage in Terrorism Evolution

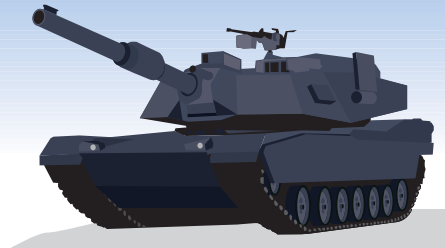
The most dangerous among the new elements of terrorism introduced by Daesh include:

1. *The combination of terrorist acts staged by individuals or small groups with the creation of quasi-armies equipped with modern weapons;*
2. *Attempts to spread their influence into many regions through a network of sleeper cells and "floating centers";*
3. *A powerful recruitment system using modern communication tools, primarily the Internet and social networks;*
4. *Regular attempts to intimidate society by posting videos of grotesque executions and torture;*

¹ Banned in Russia. – Ed. Note.

MIDDLE EAST – WORLD'S LARGEST ARMS MARKET

The US, Canada, France and the UK are the main exporters of defense equipment to the Middle East and beneficiaries of the spending boom



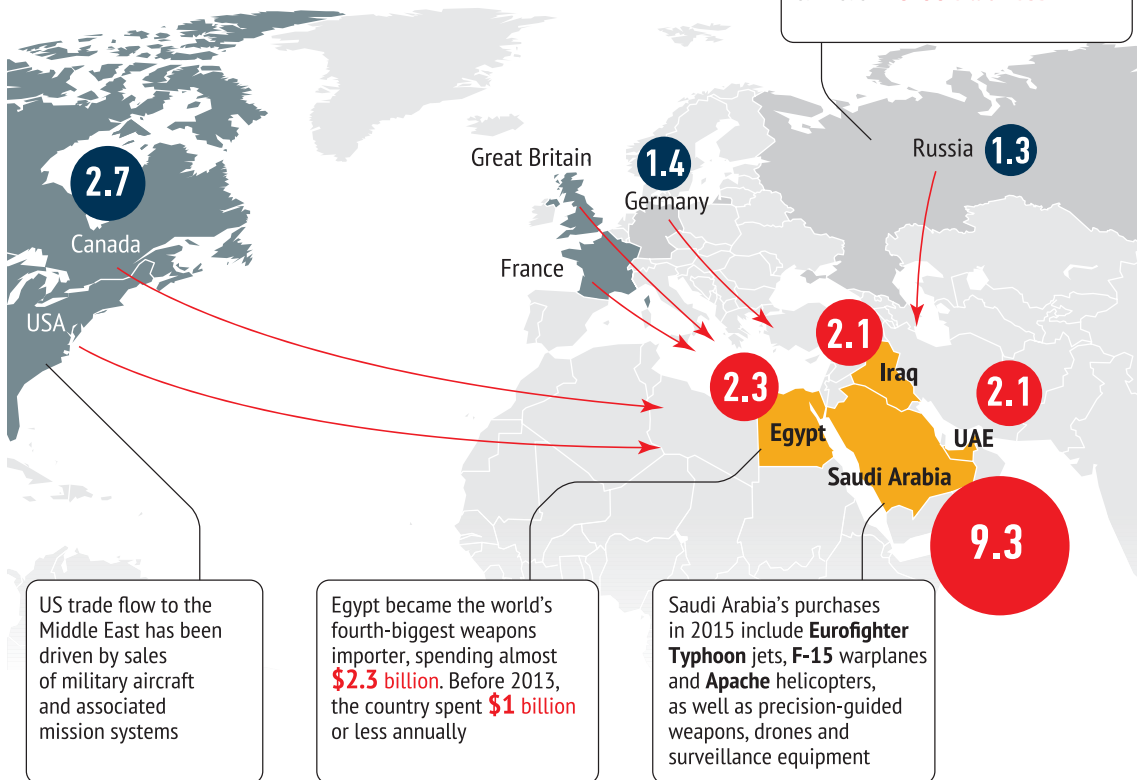
Top Defense Exporters to the Middle East

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Source: HS Jane's the Annual Global Defense Trade Report, Bloomberg

5. *A franchising system under which groups in different countries proclaim allegiance to Daesh;*
6. *A justification for violence, the enforcement of an internal culture, and presenting itself as the only means of achieving political goals;*
7. *Highlighting the global scale of the Daesh project, including in light of the international and age composition of the group's members.*

Daesh: Ambitious but Unattainable Goals

Unlike its predecessors, Daesh seeks to reshape the Middle East and beyond, erase recognized borders, and destroy nation states and the entire system of international and sociopolitical relations. In the case of Daesh, the process is more important than the end result. By establishing footholds in Syria and Iraq and creating a special governance system (archaic in form but nevertheless effective), they are able to maintain the allegiance of their adepts and provide them with material means, safety and self-esteem, albeit in a highly unusual way.

At the same time, different branches of Daesh can adapt to existing political conditions by creating a symbiosis of extremist religious fanatics with political groups that see the jihadist agenda as a vehicle to attain their own goals. In Iraq, these groups comprise former members of the Baath elite and Naqshbandi, a major Sunni spiritual order of Sufism, who have little in common with the ideals of Daesh. In Libya, these groups include some tribal leaders. However, it would be naïve to think that these groups can use the Daesh brand exclusively for mobilization, consolidation and for gaining a foothold on the international stage, while preserving their structure and limiting their operations to a local agenda. The Daesh branch in Libya, which was initially used to rally small tribes against their powerful enemies, has rapidly become internationalized, and there are very few, if any, Libyans among its leaders.

Russian View of the Problem

Russia regards the fusion of modern-day terrorism with state-of-the-art technology as the most serious threat to peace and stability. Modern terrorism shows no respect for national borders, bringing destruction and fear wherever it spreads. The main terrorist objective in the Middle East is to attack everything that does not fit their archaic conception of social relations and interaction.

Extremism and terrorism have a domestic political dimension for Russia, which explains its special attitude to these evils. Russia has experienced several bouts of terrorism in its history. It is also considered the birthplace of systemic terrorism, which appeared in Russia in the latter half of the 19th century.

In Russia's recent history, terrorism is primarily connected with the Chechen wars. But extremists recruit adepts from the millions of Muslims in Russia to this day. According to official data, 2,719 had gone to Syria as of early 2016, including about

200 from the Volga region, 130 from Kabardino-Balkaria, 500 from Chechnya and 900 from Dagestan. It is alarming that the geography has expanded for recruiting fighters for the caliphate. Moreover, migrant workers from Central Asia who live in close-knit ethnic communities in Russia, prison inmates, young people without opportunities for self-realization or social mobility, as well as people from other vulnerable groups have been known to succumb to jihadist propaganda.

Of particular concern is the possibility that extremists who have trained to fight in the Middle East will return home when the terrorist groups operating in Syria and Iraq are defeated by the national armies with support from international coalitions. **Another major concern is that extremists will mobilize Russian citizens from “solidarity groups” that are characteristic of a traditional society.** Although they do not accept the jihadist ideology, these people can nevertheless become easy prey for terrorists in their search for self-identity.

Balancing Interests in the Fight Against Daesh

Military force has always been the primary method of fighting terrorism. In light of Daesh’s territorial claims in the Middle East, the parties fighting against it are mostly relying on military force, too. However, a broad counter-terrorism coalition has not yet been created. While it is unlikely that the United States and possibly Saudi Arabia and Turkey would join the fight on the ground, this would seriously change the balance of forces in the area, though it would not necessarily lead to better coordination of the operations conducted by the United States, Russia and the regional members of their two coalitions.

It can be said that **Russia is currently viewed in the region as being the most consistent and effective force fighting Daesh.**

The fight against terrorism is not the main priority for the majority of external forces involved in the Syrian conflict, although international counterterrorism cooperation can help overcome mistrust. That being said, there are no grounds to believe that such cooperation would promote interaction between the leading world powers outside Syria, in other parts of the world or on other issues. Moreover, the formal commitment of external parties to fight terrorism in the Middle East has not helped create a broad coalition but has rather diluted efforts. **The fact that the United States, Saudi Arabia and Russia have created their own coalitions for political reasons has added a new element to the counterterrorism operations and created potential risks related to a lack of coordination.**

Ultimately, each regional power has its own agenda, and these powers’ fight against extremism is ultimately a means of attaining their own goals. Saudi Arabia is concerned about the confrontation with Iran and its allies in the region, which is why the Saudi coalition does not include Shia forces. Iran has been trying to use the situation to strengthen its positions in the Middle East. Turkey is focused on the Kurdish problem, and it is willing to support the ethnic and confessional groups, including

terrorist ones, who are holding back and weakening the Kurds. The United States, which assumed leadership of an anti-Daesh coalition, has not increased its military involvement out of respect for its allies' positions in the Middle East. And lastly, Israel is more concerned about Hezbollah receiving new weapons than the threat from Daesh. **Effective operations against terrorists will be impossible unless all the parties strike a balance between their interests in the region.**

In addition, the development of counterterrorism tactics and strategy is hindered by the absence of an internationally coordinated definition of terrorism. Views of various terrorist groups have always been influenced by politics, above all in regard to certain ethnic groups, which are denounced as terrorists or hailed as freedom fighters depending on the situation. For example, some countries view Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations, while other countries disagree. Likewise, global and regional powers cannot agree on Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham in Syria. Although these groups are not uniform, Russia believes that both of them are terrorist organizations. Since terrorism is essentially a method for achieving one's goals, all attempts to clearly identify groups that use terrorist methods have failed. Besides, fighters from these groups often join organizations that are not viewed as terrorist. In this context, the jihadist army is clearly fluid and can easily move around the Middle East and beyond to evade military strikes.

The divergent interests of those who are fighting terrorism has been further complicated by the tendency to see the coalition of the Syrian Army, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah, which has been waging an all-out fight against terrorism with support from Russia's Aerospace Forces, as an anti-Sunni Shia bloc. In light of the growing Sunni-Shia confrontation in the Muslim world, some Sunni states and communities have taken to criticizing Russia. The half-hearted involvement of these Sunni states and communities in the fight against Daesh, which is considered a Sunni group that exploits sectarian tensions, is hindering the creation of a broad coalition against this highly dangerous terrorist organization.

Launching a political process in Syria could enhance trust between the key external and regional players, as well as facilitate a compromise among the key political actors in Syria, functioning as a way to build up the trust necessary to fight Daesh and to strengthen cooperation between military and intelligence agencies.

The soft counterterrorism tools, including ideological and economic ones are of special significance now. They underpin the joint efforts of the global Muslim community, including its Russian component, which has a unique experience of peaceful coexistence with diverse ethnic and religious groups.

In practical terms, this implies elevating Islam's true humanitarian values above the aggressive ideology of Daesh and raising awareness in society. Young people are inundated with information and are unable to fully appreciate the traditional elements of global culture that have constituted the moral foundation for individuals and societies for ages.

IV. The Middle East Transformation at the International Level, and Russia's Interests Actors

Nearly all conflicts in the Middle East tend to quickly become internationalized. Military interference by a coalition of countries (Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya) has highlighted the role of global powers, which seemed to have growing influence on the situation in the region, at the expense of the influence of regional actors.

The presence of global actors, primarily the United States, in the region has decreased in recent years. The negative experience of the early 2000s forced them to take a more cautious attitude towards intervention and adopt a lower profile in the Middle East. The willingness to provide military support to any opponents of authoritarian regimes (and there are no other governments in the Middle East) and an unwillingness to assume responsibility for subsequent developments have turned foreign interference into a recipe for destroying states. For example, in Libya NATO supported a local guerrilla movement that was badly organized, had no political strategy, and was composed of traditional actors whose intentions were not clear to their Western allies.

The global actors agree on the need to create a stable subsystem of international relations in the Middle East, but their joint efforts towards this goal have been hindered by several issues. These include the projection of bilateral relations (primarily US-Russian relations) onto the Middle East, persisting differences over other issues, mutual mistrust, clashing narratives, and opposing approaches to the choice of tactics and strategy.

At the same time, the Syrian conflict showed that global actors such as Russia and the US have for the most part maintained their ability to influence events in the region and are generally capable of productive cooperation in emergencies.

Regional actors, including non-state ones, have become more active in the Middle East since the early 2010s. The discussion of the Libyan issue at the UN Security Council was initiated by Arab states, which have become key actors in the Syrian, Yemeni and Libyan conflicts.

Saudi Arabia is the only Arab country among the regional claimants to leadership – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel. The long history of complicated relations between the regional powers and the Arab world prevents the bulk of the region from viewing their claims as legitimate. Given enough volatility, other states could also claim this role, for example Qatar.

Every major power in the Middle East has its own national interests that run counter to those of other regional and global players. Relations between Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel have been tense for a long time and have deteriorated at times into destructive crises.

We see greater activity on the part of peripheral states – Iran and Turkey – which has increased tensions over long-standing problems and created new causes

for confrontation. At the same time, relations between some of the former antagonists have become friendlier. For example, while Israeli-Turkish relations have deteriorated, Israel and Saudi Arabia seem to have a better understanding now, and the same can be said of the other Gulf countries. The main driver here is not the similarity of their core interests, but the need to fight against a common enemy, whether Iran, Hezbollah or Assad, which is why this trend is unstable and heavily dependent on circumstance.

Overall, the absence of a strategic vision for the region, with regional powers primarily seeking to strengthen their positions, and the failure to recognize “red lines” and the acceptable limits of opportunism have created a situation where the regional actors mostly rely on military force, while soft power only extends to traditional ties and commitments, be they ethnic, religious, tribal, or dynastic. These processes tend to descend rapidly to brinksmanship or military confrontation. Since a large part of the region has been at war for a long time and the overall level of conflict in the world has increased, the threshold of violence has become lower, as evidenced by the actions of radical organizations and even state actors.

Balance of Forces and Mutual Dependence

The balance of forces between regional and global powers is changing. The regional forces recognize their limited capabilities and continue to rely on their global partners. As the ambitions and stakes in the regional battle continue to grow, they are using the global actors' forces and influence to their advantage. During the Cold War, regional countries actively tried to involve their global allies in regional conflicts. The ongoing rivalry in the fragmenting Middle East, where countries are fighting to preserve the old order or create a new order, has again made global powers vulnerable to the influence of their regional allies.

At the same time, the great power conceit, or global actors' confidence in their ability to rule the region and use the Middle East agenda to their benefit, can backfire. Regional actors have been known to use personal ties to outmaneuver their global partners, who often yield to the charms of personality. However, the opposite can also occur: a reliable strategic partnership can become surprisingly complicated when personal relationships between leaders do not develop.

Attempts by regional powers to attain their goals can now destabilize international relations much more seriously than in the past, because of the high degree of interdependence between regional and global forces, despite their asymmetric capabilities. The will to achieve purely self-interested goals have a much greater ability to destabilize international relations than ever before, further undermining mutual trust.

It should be acknowledged that some regional leaders turned out to be better prepared for the complex political game than their global partners, who sometimes fail to anticipate the reactions of the partners and overlook issues that are of crucial significance for some actors in the Middle East. **Political decisions should be made with due account of expert opinion and the cultural specifics and history of local societies.**

In light of the inability of old regional associations such as the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council to deal with the increasingly complex regional problems, attempts have been made to create new coalitions and associations. However, these are only designed to deal with current issues rather than to coordinate regional efforts. For example, the Saudi-led coalition of about 40 countries only looked good on paper and turned out to be anti-Shia rather than anti-Daesh.

The issue of cooperation of regional and global forces is not just about the Middle East. It's about developing clearer and safer rules of the game to preclude overreaction, the use of military force in crisis situations, or enforcement of decisions on others.

Russia's Interests

The Middle East has always held special significance for Russia due to its geography, political importance and economic potential, including energy. As the legal successor of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited the policy priorities it pursued in the Middle East for decades. However, eventually it had to change that policy. On the one hand, Russia did not have the capabilities of its predecessor and could not claim the status of a great power, which views regional policies as a means to higher aspirations. On the other hand, changes in the paradigm of international relations and the collapse of the bipolar world order undermined the fundamental elements of Russia's regional policies. There was no ideological confrontation where the sides fight to expand their spheres of influence. Bipolarity gave way to the economic and military asymmetry of Russia and the United States, while other states and associations grew stronger and proved capable of providing balance and preventing the rise of a single center of power that would dominate the entire system of international relations.

Russia's current interests in the Middle East can be divided into two groups. The first one comprises traditional interests based on security issues. These interests can be defined as a desire to prevent instability from approaching Russia's borders. Any threat of war, the concentration of foreign armies, civil wars in the region, conflicts and terrorist attacks can be of concern to Russia, because the borders of the former Soviet republics are not well protected, and the spread of radical ideas and their proponents to the Caucasus, the Volga region or Central Asia would make Russia extremely vulnerable.

The second group includes interests related to Russia's desire to reaffirm its status as a power with its own views on global and regional issues and an independent policy. The ultimate goal is to protect the interests of Russian business (primarily in sphere of energy resources), and of the defense industry, which exports weapons to the Middle East.

Greater attention to Russia's interests in the Middle East has been spurred by the military operation in Syria and the creation of a coalition to fight terrorism

on the ground. Russia's actions in Syria were unprecedented from a military and political standpoint, as they combined naval and aerospace operations with a surprise factor in terms of strategy and political decisions, as well as a high level of coordination.

A host of considerations influences **Russia's policy towards Syria**. First, the situation in Syria allowed Russia to demonstrate its departure from the post-Cold War system, which is based on the Western view that the Soviet Union's collapse amounted to defeat. Russia likely interpreted the intention of some Western quarters to formalize its defeat by expanding NATO and its spheres of influence, without any regard for Russia's national interests, as disrespect for an economically weaker partner. Part of Russian society, political groups and the expert community view the Middle East as an area where Russia can stand up against the Western actions aimed at undermining Russia's influence on the international stage and to elbow it out of the regions and spheres of activity that are of priority importance to Russia. It must be said that this traditional confrontation sometimes flares up due to changes in the political situation. At the same time, Western intrigues cannot explain everything that is happening in the region. Internal tensions, the activity of regional forces and disagreements between them can provoke conflicts as easily as the policies of external actors.

Therefore, it would be wrong, or at least naive, to portray the Russian operation in Syria as an attempt to draw international attention away from the Ukraine crisis. Russia's interest in creating a broad coalition against international terrorism, which threatened the foundations of Syrian statehood and was spreading tensions beyond the Middle East, is based on a desire to improve relations with the West in the areas where they had a common enemy and no major points of contention. Nevertheless, this did not mean that success in the Middle East would automatically extend to other spheres of international relations.

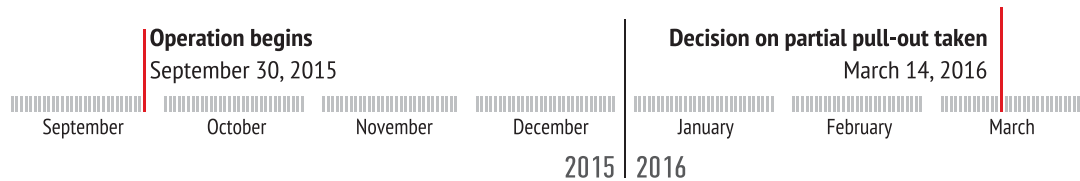
Russia's support for President Bashar al-Assad should not be overstated. Russia could not accept Assad's overthrow in a military coup that would replace his government with Islamic radicals with direct support from external forces.

First, Russia protested efforts to lay the groundwork for a repeat of the Libyan scenario in Syria. The Kremlin looked on with serious concern, even if exaggerated, at the growing tendency to replace governments in military coups or color revolutions. This tendency does not directly threaten Russia, but this is how Russia interpreted the events in Ukraine and the pressure brought to bear on the legitimate government in Syria.

Second, had the opposition overthrown the Syrian government with the help of external pressure, this would have had a powerful destructive effect on the entire region. The most probable result would have been the chaotic dissolution of Syria with extremely negative consequences, including the seizure of Damascus by Daesh. In practical terms, Russia preferred to deal with a secular Syrian government, which means that Syria should launch reforms and prevent the spread of Islamic radicalism to other countries in the Middle East and beyond. The deployment of Russian forces in Syria can be interpreted as a successful attempt to change the balance of the forces in the war, which was increasingly seen as confrontation between Assad and Daesh. Offensive operations

RUSSIAN AEROSPACE FORCES' OPERATION IN SYRIA

In Syria, Russia was able to test its newest weaponry in combat conditions



THE SYRIAN OPERATION IN FIGURES:

9,000
sorties in total

70–80
sorties a day

250
targets hit

209
oil production
and transportation
facilities destroyed

2,000
fighters of Russian
origin, including
17 warlords, killed

700
tonnes of food delivered
to besieged towns by air and land

42
groups joined
the ceasefire

400
localities and more than 10,000 sq km (4,000 sq mi)
of land liberated by the Syrian Arab Army

Sources: Russian Ministry Of Defence, Izvestia, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Zvezda Tv

THE RUSSIAN AEROSPACE FORCES GROUP IN SYRIA

70 aircraft

70 drones

4,000 personnel

Different type of aircraft were used

Su-35S
(Flanker-E)

The most state-of-the-art multipurpose fighter jets

Su-30SM
(Flanker-C)**Su-34**
(Fullback)

Strike fighters

Su-24M
(Fencer-D)

Upgraded strike fighters

Su-25SM
(Frogfoot)

Attack aircraft

Tu-160 (Blackjack)**Tu-95MS** (Bear)

Russia for the first time used its strategic bombers to hit enemy targets

Tu-22M3 (Backfire)

Supersonic missile-carrying bombers

Mi-24 (Hind)**Mi-8** (Hip)

Helicopters

High-precision weapons were widely used

KAB-500S

Satellite-guided bombs

Kh-25 (AS-10 Karen)

Laser-guided missiles

Kh-29 (AS-14 Kedge)**FAB-500****FAB-250**

SVP-24 Gefest sighting complexes installed on the Su-24M bombers improved the precision of strikes with unguided bombs

Kalibr NK (Sizzler)**Kh-555** (AS-15 Kent)**Kh-101**

The Syria operation became the "debut" of Russian air- and sea-based cruise missiles. Dozens of them were launched from the distance of more than 1,000 kilometers (620 miles)

A powerful air defence system was deployed in Syria

S-400
(SA-21 Growler)**Buk-M3**
(SA-17 Grizzly)**Pantsir-S1**
(SA-22 Greyhound)**Tor-M2**
(SA-15 Gauntlet)

It includes the most advanced systems of the Russian Armed Forces

*NATO reporting names are given in parentheses, when available

Sources: Russian Ministry Of Defence, Izvestia, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, Zvezda Tv

by the Syrian army, Kurdish militia and Hezbollah units, supported by Russia's Aerospace Forces, denied the jihadists' victory, made the "moderate" opposition more pliant, and created conditions for coordinating a ceasefire agreement with the United States.

Russia viewed the start of the political process in Syria – which helped stabilize the situation and also created conditions for improving relations with global actors – as an achievement justifying the withdrawal of a major part of its Aerospace Forces.

Increased attention to Russia's policy regarding Syria does not mean that Russia's interests are limited to Syria. Relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran are of great significance to Russia, and its ties with Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Israel and several non-state actors are important. The operation in Syria has strengthened Russia's positions in the Middle East, but it has also resulted in losses. The terrorist threat to Russia has not been eliminated, as evidenced by the crash of the Russian passenger plane over Sinai, and relations with Turkey have soured dramatically. It is probably a distinguishing feature of the Middle East that you cannot win a clear victory there, unless you view the shift from violence towards a ceasefire and talks as victory.

V. Regional Security

Middle East security is no longer a regional problem, with international relations as a whole increasingly falling victim to the region's growing instability, new and old conflicts, and more concerted action (including military action) by regional powers and non-state actors. As before, the region is internally divided and devoid of checks and balances, and there is no security system capable of translating military confrontations into political arrangements.

It is also rather difficult to define the current situation in the Middle East, which has taken shape under the impact of increasingly complex and chaotic international relations. The gravity and instability of the situation is comparable to Europe during the Thirty Years War or the two world wars. It can also be likened to a new Cold War, which turned various regions of the world into a stage for confrontation between the superpowers as they sought to avoid a global clash at the expense of the regional agenda. They were not always successful, and the Middle East has provided plenty of examples of regional clients using global players to pursue their own interests and pushing the great powers to the brink of war. At the time, the USA and the USSR found a way out by cosponsoring the Arab-Israeli peace process, one of the longest running conflicts in the world.

The ability to produce tension is one of the defining features of regional actors in the Middle East. In recent years, conflicts have increasingly taken the form of hybrid warfare, blending interstate hostilities between regular armies with civil wars. Many conflicts are asymmetrical, with belligerents possessing different capabilities and potentials. States are confronting groups or movements that use their own methods

of causing destruction, including terrorism. Foreign military interference, which most often is done outside of the bounds of international law, is a special case.

The intensification of the transformative processes underway in the Middle East in the second decade of the 21st century has made the security deficit there even larger, while ushering in painful changes at the national, regional and international levels.

Weak regimes and institutions have resulted in disorganized societies and governments that are unable to perform the basic functions, spawning new conflicts as a result. These hybrid and asymmetrical conflicts include both comparatively recent hotbeds of tension (Syria and Iraq, Libya, Yemen) and conflicts that are a legacy of the bipolar world, such as the Palestinian-Israeli and West Saharan conflicts.

Each “new” conflict is a security threat to neighboring countries, and in many cases, the threat is already beginning to materialize. Epicenters of regional strife – the wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya – are disrupting the balance in the entire Middle East.

The stagnant Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains a stumbling block to the creation of a regional security system. Moreover, it is still a source of inspiration for radical anti-Western political forces in the region.

The parties to these conflicts are developing network infrastructures by improving financial, informational and logistical ties. This is a matter of particular concern. For example, as Daesh grew weaker in Syria and Iraq, it immediately began to grow stronger in Libya.

Despite the high level of tensions, it is still an open question, to what extent local elites realize the danger of the upsurge in violence, which has come in varied forms (from committing national armed forces to provoking a backlash from terrorist groups); how much their interests are affected; and whether they can regard the current situation as favorable to their priorities. Outside forces are taking more even-handed approaches to the developments and playing down threats and challenges by compromising over a narrowly self-interested policy that consists of consolidating their own positions and building up their presence in the region.

The lack of understanding among regional and external forces as to the rules of interaction during conflicts, attempts to act unilaterally, disregard for international norms and a predisposition to use force on every occasion, taken together, create serious obstacles to international efforts to deescalate conflicts.

At the same time, the era when security was based on mutually opposed regional alliances, treaties and military bases, has receded into the past, and isolated instances of backsliding cannot prevent the emergence of a new international order. This order goes beyond territorial divisions and spheres of influence and creates a balance of interests in different areas.

The US has curtailed its commitments in the Middle East in recent years, as both the United States and the countries of the region have grown weary of each other. Yet another reason is the **obvious bankruptcy of its policy of toppling authoritarian regimes to impose democratic institutions.** Building democracies that are less likely

to go to war with each other is too remote a prospect, and it certainly cannot be imposed by military force from the outside. **A likely alternative is a system of strict reciprocal commitments, which, with the support of outside forces, would deter Middle East actors, regardless of how democratic they are, from rushing to use force.**

There is an urgent need to call for measures that would eradicate the propensity towards conflict and for a regional security system. After all, there are common threats facing all players, however divided they may be, and opposing them in unison might form the basis for future collaboration.

Attempts to stop or settle the conflicts include exerting military pressure to change the alignment of forces and seeking political solutions via a national dialogue, a clearly defined sequence of steps (a peace roadmap), international collective mediation, and initiatives advanced by separate states.

Countries in the region have taken the back seat in efforts to solve their problems for too long. Currently, the only way to resolve existing differences is to join the efforts to create a new security system that would establish a balance between domestic and foreign policies and between compliance with international law and the aspiration of certain states for regional leadership.

In order to build a general security system in the context of a heated rivalry between regional actors, the possibility of unilateral actions in the region must be foreclosed. The same goes for third-country military interference without the necessary mandate and in violation of international law. A regional security system, including the WMD-free zone proposed by Russia, requires renewed efforts to define its framework, principal objectives and parameters. The existing groundwork should be combined with approaches that better reflect the current dynamics of the military-political processes unfolding in the Middle East.

On the Path to a Solution

In a deteriorating situation, unconventional solutions are needed.

- *Introducing external administration when a state functionally no longer exists or is incapable of providing physical and social protection to citizens. This response in itself is fraught with additional questions: Under whose aegis and with what resources? What will be the role of international and regional organizations?*
- *If unitary states are decentralized along ethnic and sectarian lines, the international community should help to establish central and regional administrations to regulate cultural diversity that must not be allowed to devolve into political rivalry.*
- *Preventing the forcible redrawing of borders, as well as providing international assistance for or guarantees of an “amicable divorce,” where border changes are inevitable or under way.*
- *Launching a negotiating process on a regional security system in the Middle East, or a Helsinki process for the Middle East.*

In this context, several specific courses of action based on past experience but adapted to the current reality recommend themselves. In particular, it could be possible to draw

on experience of the multilateral talks facilitated by the five-group mechanism that was established by the Moscow Organizing Meeting in January 1992. These five working groups dealt with arms control and regional security; regional economic development; refugees; water resources; and environment.

Specifically, the Working Group on Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS Working Group) was aimed at facilitating stabilization and developing conflict prevention measures. Its work between sessions proceeded on two levels: conceptual (long-term arms control problems) and operational (developing confidence-building measures). Despite certain headway achieved at the multilateral talks, further progress was largely dependent on the general state of efforts toward a political settlement. Since the latter half of 1996, the working groups' plenary sessions have not convened because of complications in Arab-Israeli relations and the stagnation of the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Nevertheless, ACRS Working Group proved effective in developing unified measures for security, oversight and confidence building in the region.

A number of ideas suggested during earlier regional security initiatives could be used as well.

For example, it is worth considering the experience of ASEAN and the implementation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Pancha Sheela or Pancasila), as well as the more general possibility of formulating a common "code of conduct" for global and regional actors in the Middle East.

The code could be based on the following main principles: balance in the relations of global actors with all countries in the region; multilateral security cooperation at the UN; global support for regional collective security initiatives; support for strong state institutions possessing a clear vision of development objectives; support for civil society institutions; respect for state sovereignty and political solutions to problems; multilateral cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

In addition, it is necessary to acknowledge that the situation in the region is not entirely dependent on issues of war and peace. Economic and social processes also play a role. **Regional problems, such as the lack of a security system, mass unemployment, and the need to reform healthcare and education systems, should be addressed all at once without prioritizing certain aspects.**

Keeping all this in mind, it makes sense to follow the Helsinki experience. Among other things, Russian experts have suggested using Helsinki's "three basket" format (security, economic, and humanitarian cooperation), which is universal in structure and applicable to the Middle East.

There is cause for hope in the Middle East. Both local players and outside forces have incentives to work toward a safer and more predictable future. Convening a regional security conference could be the first step towards setting an agenda and forming working groups.

The Middle East: darkness before the new dawn? Regional conflicts and the future of the global community

Moscow, June 2017

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The report develops the discussion which took place at the Club's conference "The Middle East: When Will Tomorrow Come?" (February 27–28, 2017)

In recent years, the public in both Russia and the West has increasingly come to view the Middle East as a region of violence and terrorism. Despite the fact that a number of Middle Eastern countries are not involved in conflicts, those that are seem to determine the political life of the region. What's more, these conflicts have come to involve ever more regional and global powers, have turned into proxy wars, are destroying state sovereignty, and serve as breeding grounds for hostile non-state and anti-state forces, thus instilling the world with a sense of fear and uncertainty about the future.

In the six years since the so-called Arab Spring – the subject of so much romanticized revolutionary rhetoric – conflicts racking the Middle East have claimed, even by conservative estimates, more than half a million lives – approximately 400,000 in Syria alone, according to the UN. The more than 10 million refugees from the region have created a migration crisis: Jordan has taken in more than 2.5 million, Lebanon more than 1 million, and Jordan more than 500,000. The crisis has become a central issue in Europe and is bringing about the depopulation of Libya.

The situation has caused humanitarian catastrophes in areas of Syria, Iraq, Libya, and above all, Yemen, where 60% of the population now suffers from hunger and the threat of starvation. Entire nations of peoples with centuries of history – the Assyrian, Azidi, Shabak, Sabian-Mandaean, and Kakai – are now at risk of annihilation. An entire generation of young people steeped in an atmosphere of violence, hatred, and hopelessness and deprived of access to education now has no hope for a future.

Whenever and however these conflicts ultimately resolve, it is obvious that the Middle East will no longer be the same. But to what extent are these conflicts the result of global trends, and to what extent are they the outcome of regional dynamics? How and to what extent do they now – and might they later – influence the global agenda?

Is it possible to find a settlement for these conflicts that would guarantee stability and prosperity for the whole region – or will war rage there forever? And what is the cause of war?

I. The Roots of Evil: on the Origins of Conflict

The origins and causes of the conflicts in the Middle East are numerous and diverse. They also stem from short-, medium-, and long-term historical processes – many of which were recently disrupted.

The **long-term processes** include the wide gap in natural resource wealth between countries, the deepening water shortage, demographic imbalances, and systemic problems of socio-economic development.

The Arab states face a rapidly growing population, now numbering 350 million, that occupies only 4.2% of the region's total land mass,¹ – an area roughly equal to that of Spain. Approximately 80% of the remaining area consists of deserts that have also been expanding rapidly in recent years.

The availability of water per capita is seven times lower in the region than the world average, and approximately 55% of the population suffers from water shortages.² According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, by 2025 only Lebanon will have an adequate water supply, whereas Jordan, Libya, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Algeria and Bahrain will all experience acute water crises.³

It is telling that the draught-induced relocation of almost 2 million Syrians was one of the reasons for the protest movement in that country. The Yemeni Interior Ministry also reports that, on the eve of the Arab Spring, the scarcity and unfair distribution of water was the cause of approximately 70% of the conflicts in the country's interior and resulted in 3,000–4,000 deaths per year.

In the poorer countries of the Middle East, water scarcity contributes to a food deficit that is particularly acute owing to the nature of demographic processes there. At the same time, many societies in the region have already undergone a demographic transition: in the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, in Libya, and to some extent in Algeria, the oil and gas industry developed even as social and political traditionalism remained intact. This resulted in a lower mortality rate even as birth rates remained high and led to a prolonged population growth.

As much as 60% of the population of the Arab states is under 30 years of age, a fact that helps explain the dynamism of those societies, but also their volatility. The violent social behaviors seen there result not only from the growing number of challenges they face, but also from the incomplete process of social modernization and an identity crisis, on the one hand, and from the breakdown of traditional mechanisms fostering mutual trust, on the other.

The problems having a **medium-length history** stem from systemic problems of socio-economic and political development, as well as the functioning of these countries' political systems in general. Analyses of the underlying causes of the Arab Spring most often cite this set of problems.

On the eve of the mass protests in 2010, the average rate of economic growth in the Middle East was quite high – approximately 5% – as compared to 2.4% for OECD country economies.⁴ And in 2012, the aggregate revenues for the four oil-exporting Arab monarchies – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE – reached a high of more

¹ Al-Hamad A.Y. The Arab World: Performance and Prospects. Dubai, 2003, p. 15

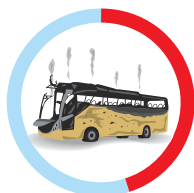
² Arab research: Yearbook. Moscow, 2010, p. 15

³ Water Management and Food Security in MENA, 2015, FAO, http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/rne/docs/LWDMMain-Report-2nd-Edition.pdf

⁴ Arab World Competitiveness Report 2011–2012. Geneva, 2011. P. 7. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_AWC_Report_2011-12.pdf

MIDDLE EAST TODAY

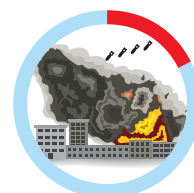
THE ARAB REGION IN FIGURES



45% of the world's terrorist attacks in 2014



5% of the world's population



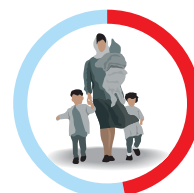
17.6% of all global conflicts between 1948 and 2014



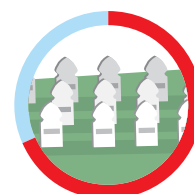
57% of the world's refugees, including Palestinian refugees, 2014



Most devastated countries



47% of world's internally displaced, 2014



68% of the world's battle-related deaths between 1989 and 2014



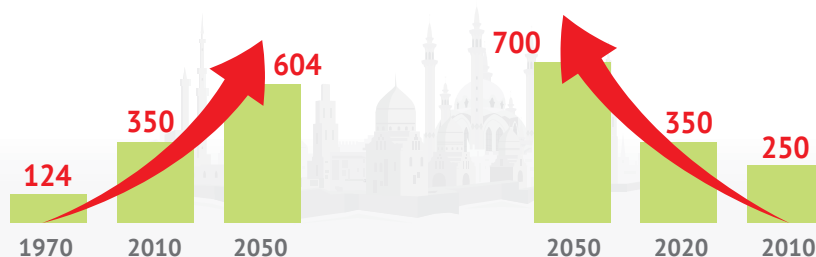
21% military spending rise since 2009



30% Youth unemployment in 2014

Muslim population increase (mln)

Number of inhabitants living in countries vulnerable to conflict (mln)



Source: UNDP Arab Human Development Report (<http://www.arab-hdr.org/>).

than \$600 bn U.S. (as compared to \$70–80 bn U.S. in the late 1990s).¹ What's more, part of this oil windfall spurred economic growth in other Arab countries through workers employed on the Arabian Peninsula transferring earnings home, as well as through direct government financial assistance and private foundations.

At the same time, macroeconomic indicators turned out to be deceptive. Liberal economic reforms made it possible to raise the average standard of living and expand the middle class in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria, but also prompted those populations to hold unreasonably high economic expectations and widened the property inequality gap. Individuals with close ties to the authorities, high-ranking government officials, businesspeople, and senior law enforcement and defense officials were the primary beneficiaries of that growth – altogether representing less than 10% of the population. A significant portion of the region's population continues to live below the poverty line. According to World Bank data for 2015, 53% of the people in the Arab world live on \$4 per day or less.²

The residents of agricultural areas – 44% of the region's population – make up the majority of those living on the verge of poverty. That segment comprises 40% of the population in Egypt, and 62% in Syria – primarily in the eastern part of the country. Up to 80% of the population in some areas of Yemen is living in poverty.³

The continual fallout from this “social bomb” causes chronic unemployment that, according to official data alone, averages from 10% to 25% across the region, and reaches as high as 40% among youth under 30. In Algeria, for example, youth comprise 50% of the population and suffer a 30% unemployment rate – three times higher than the 10% unemployment rate for older Algerians.⁴ The OECD estimates that it would be necessary to create 25 million new jobs over the next decade simply to prevent an increase in the unemployment rate. That would require a 5.5% annual economic growth rate – an unattainable goal at present.⁵

The fact that different countries' economies are organized very differently only reinforces the extremely high degree of fragmentation between societies in the Middle East and cements the major role played by the shadow economy – that accounts for 40%–60% of the economy in some countries, and up to 80%–90% in specific areas – not even counting areas of armed conflict. This alienates the authorities from the citizenry and hinders the development of modern statehood. As

¹ Analytical Center of the Government of the Russian Federation, journal of current events in the global economy, issue No. 2, November 2015, prepared by a team led by L. Grigorev. In Focus: The Economy of Arab States, figure 10, p. 13.

² The World Bank. Annual Report 2015. Middle East and North Africa. www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena

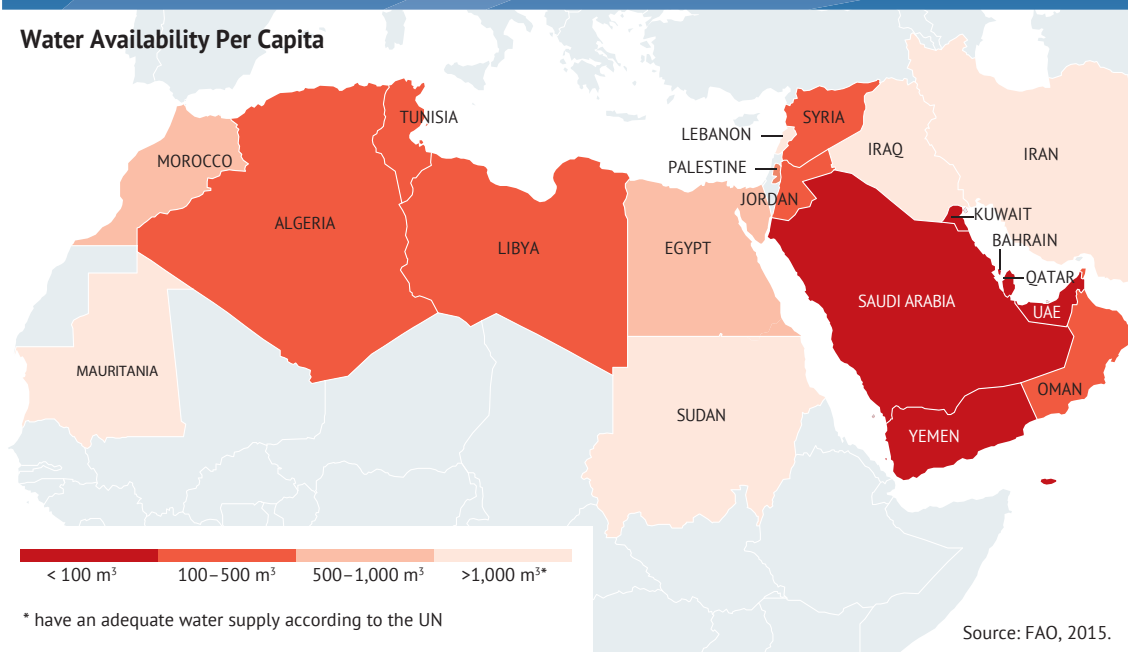
³ The New Middle East, Protest and Revolution in the Arab World edited by Fawaz A. Gerges, 2014, p. 12

⁴ The Arab Crisis and Its International Implications. Moscow, 2014, p. 36, The New Middle East. Protest and Revolution in the Arab World... P. 11.

⁵ Arab World Competitiveness Report 2013. Geneva, 2013. P. 9. <http://www.ebrd.com/downloads/news/arab-competitiveness-report.pdf>

THE LACK OF WATER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Water Availability Per Capita

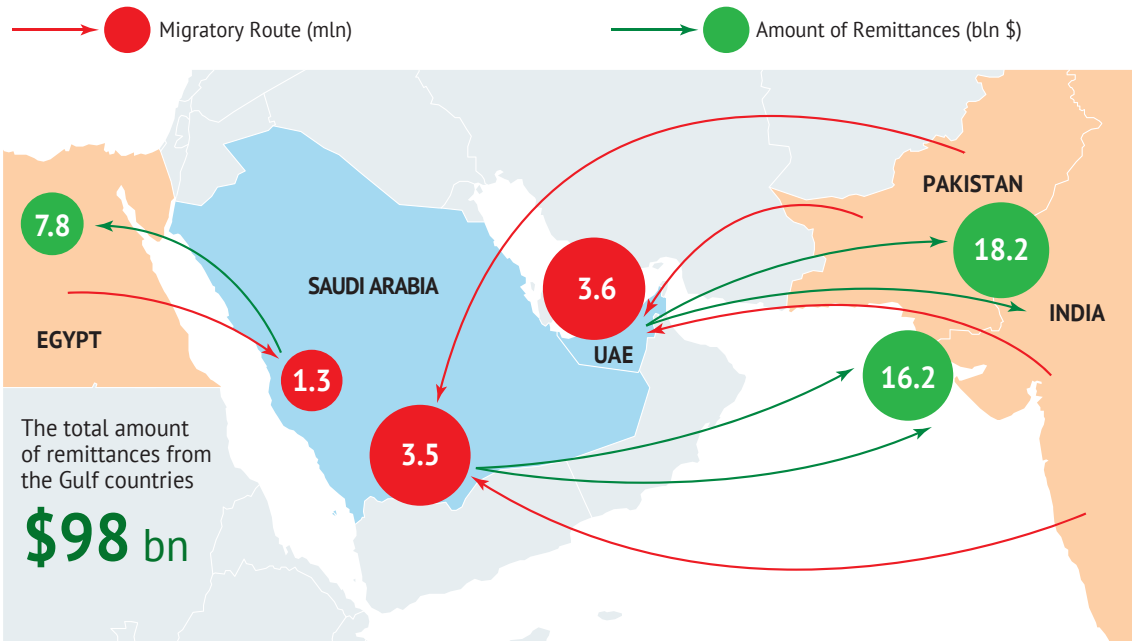


a result, many segments of society continue to view the state authorities as an alien and even hostile force.

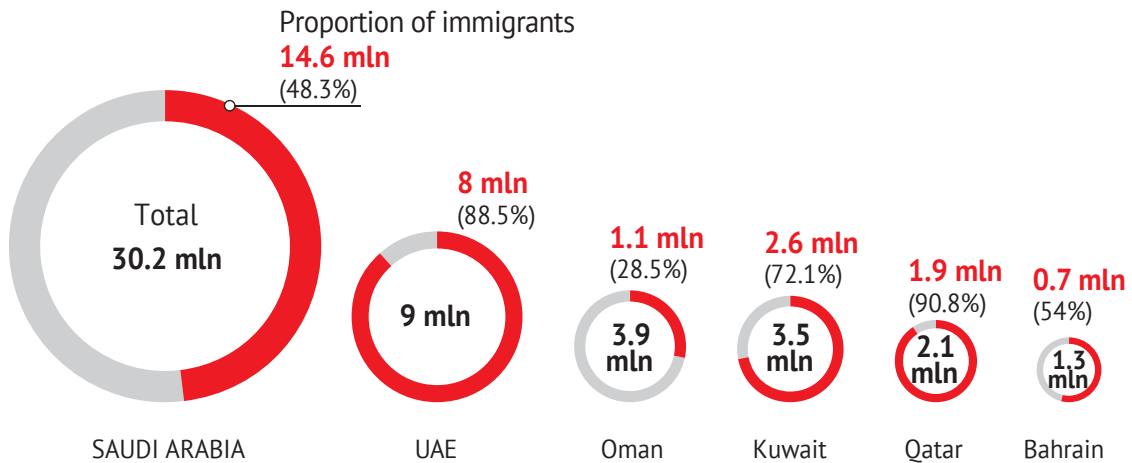
This is connected with the weak condition of statehood indicative of almost every country in the region. That, in turn, is caused by the uneven development of institutions – a situation in which the institutions of the executive branch are highly developed and complex in structure, but are mismatched against weak legislative and judicial branches of government. Although institutions of civil society are actively developing in such countries as Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey, they remain marginalized, their activities generally affect only a small part of the modernized population, and they are often dependent on outside support.

Compounding all of these internal factors are external influences connected with the place the Middle East occupies in the system of international relations – that is, itself, experiencing a crisis. A paradoxical situation has arisen from the absence of an obvious hegemon and the relative weakness of each regional power – all within the context of a general crisis in leadership and the international community's transition to a multi-polar world. The interests of all the world's major powers intersect in the Middle East, and each of them considers the stability and sustainable development of the region an important priority. Europe and Russia are arguably exceptions, however, with the former currently focused on its own problems and the latter having only limited interests there.

MAIN MIGRATORY ROUTES TO THE GULF COUNTRIES



Proportion of immigrants in a total population



Source: Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016.

Finally, the processes having a **short history** are those that stem from current geopolitical and economic rivalries, the crisis of political leadership, etc.

Some of the regional conflicts were the result of unsuccessful struggles for renewal, and in the case of Syria and Yemen, the petering out of the Arab Spring. Others, such as in Iraq, were caused primarily by outside military intervention that pursued unrealistic strategic goals and employed inappropriate methods. In Libya, outside intervention sparked domestic protests.

The crisis of leadership in the Middle East is an important factor of conflictogenity, and it is occurring against the backdrop of Iran taking a more active role in the region, Turkey gradually pivoting to the South – prompted, among other things, by Ankara’s frustration with prospects for integrating into the EU – the growing strength of the smaller Persian Gulf states (Qatar foremost among them), and the U.S. “pivot to Asia” strategy that has forced Washington to reduce its activity in the region.

All of this is taking place as a change in the ruling elite approaches in a number of Middle Eastern countries, the generation gap between political elites and the general population continues to widen, and societies gain ever faster access to information. Over the past six years, one fundamentally new factor has appeared in addition to those that were already well known – current conflicts that carry the seeds of future conflicts.

However, the three-level approach to conflictogenity that traces its roots to Fernand Braudel no longer works as proposed because it turns out that long-term processes have accelerated sharply and are now influenced by a conjunction of factors.

II. The Middle Ages Resurrected: on the Specific Features of Contemporary Conflicts

The new conflicts in Syria and Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, share a number of features that distinguish them from the “old” conflicts in the Middle East and Western Sahara. On the one hand, these features are the outcome of global trends, while on the other, they could themselves engender new trends.

In place of classic “one-dimensional” conflicts involving inter-state confrontations or clashes based on ethnic or religious grounds, hybrid conflicts have emerged combining, on the one hand, aspects of confrontations between social and religious groups, civil war, and ethno-separatist struggles for the self-determination of peoples, and on the other, elements of proxy wars that admit the direct military participation of both regional and global actors.

For all the seeming novelty of the current situation, it is not unique: this is more a structural archaization of conflicts, struggles that are increasingly reminiscent of the medieval Time of Troubles, but played out using modern technolo-

gies and weapons. This phenomenon fully corresponds to the well-known concept of the Tpy Tew Middle Ages – usually applied to Western or Russian context by authors from Nikolai Berdyaev to Umberto Eco – but in this case, taken to its conflictual conclusion.

The crisis of nation states, the rapidly rising number of non-state actors, the growing role of political leaders who personify the very idea of power, the erosion of ideologies, the strengthening of traditional identities, the sacralization and politicization of historical mythology – all of these elements are rooted in the Middle Ages, and although they find their most extreme expression in Middle Eastern conflicts, they are also found in a milder form in practically every part of the world.

The asymmetry first seen in Lebanon in 2006 is another feature of these New Middle Age conflicts. However, whereas both sides in the Lebanese confrontation had essentially opportunistic motives, now the nature of the various actors' motivations correlates to their respective geopolitical "levels". For example, local non-state actors, who often group together on the basis of ethnic, religious, or tribal identity, view the conflict as an existential struggle, whereas "higher level" regional, and especially global actors pursue strictly opportunistic interests. To some extent, the Syrian government is an exception because it consolidates the country's minority based on opposition to Sunni jihadism – whose victory would spell their genocide.

The asymmetry of multi-level conflicts is manifested in the fact that, apart from simple "horizontal" confrontation between local, regional, and global forces, at each level these conflicts also involve "vertical" confrontations of global players against regional and sometimes even local forces. Because each level of the conflict is determined by its own geopolitical, economic, social, ideological, and other factors – all of which are constantly in flux – the appearance of "vertical" axes in the confrontation tends to spread the effects of these factors between levels and among an increasing number of players. The result, for example, is that, at first glance, the Russian campaign in Syria could have initially been misinterpreted completely through the prism of the Sunni-Shiite confrontation; and the actions of local Syrian forces were just as unfairly viewed as a product of the Iranian-Saudi or U.S.-Russian confrontations. The structure of the conflicts in these countries is becoming increasingly complex, with the exception of Libya and Yemen, on which the non-regional powers have taken a less clearly defined position.

The hybrid and asymmetric nature of the conflicts, compounded by the uncontrollability of borders, have given the conflicts a certain amorphous character that greatly hinders their resolution. This is seen most clearly in Libya, and less so in relatively isolated Yemen. Only after forming a quasi-alliance between Russia, Turkey, and Iran was it possible to at least partially localize the conflict.

The amorphous or permeable aspect of the conflict allows for the ready integration of this or that actor into the overall network – and this applies not only to such terrorist groups as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, but also to Shiite military and political structures: militias in Iraq, the Ansarullah movement in Yemen, Hezbollah

in Lebanon and others are all closely connected. Such networks enable non-state actors to deliver an asymmetric response to more powerful players and simultaneously expand the geographic scope of the conflict.

In the social sphere, the “erosion of modernity” occurs from the bottom up and can theoretically be viewed as the result of democratization of the informational and semantic spaces of the modern world. In place of the dictates of the Gutenberg era, we now have the universal equality of the Internet, social networks, and post-modern relativism.

In the context of the Middle East this means that local non-state actors, expressing the political will of traditional society, stand against modern institutionalized elite – effectively, a clash between the Middle Ages and modernity. However, the non-state actors’ desire to expand, gain legitimacy, and integrate into the political system on the one hand, and the need of the state authorities to expand their social base on the other, leads one group toward modernization and the other toward archaization.

Thus, the Sunni-Shiite confrontation is usually viewed as intrinsic to the local level but playing an instrumental role in the struggle for leadership between Saudi Arabia and Iran at the regional level. At the same, it cannot be denied that local actors use religious identity (in Iraq, for example), to gain access to power and financial resources, and that the elite of Iran and Saudi Arabia are strategically willing to accept the role of a nation-state even while refraining from the religious and messianic component in their foreign policy.

Syria offers another example. There, the political regime was originally secular and non-denominational, but under pressure from a religiously-based opposition, gradually came to be viewed by the outside world as Alawite – and such a label was very favorably received by a West still not fully recovered from its Edward Said style of orientalism.

Another consequence of this situation is the emergence of a plurality of often incompatible narratives that coexist on the level of society and the international political arena. In principle, they are of four basic types – religious, nationalist, globalist, and leftist-revolutionary with numerous invariants.

An extremely deep crisis of trust seems to lie at the root of this inability to form a more or less unified narrative. Of course, this is characteristic of not only the Middle East. According to The 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer report, distrust of “the system” as a whole is one of the most characteristic features of modern society.¹ However, in the Middle East, where the system is partially or completely dysfunctional and societal fragmentation is deepening, this distrust becomes a key element of interstate and social relations and might in the longterm lead to atomization of societies and politics.

¹ Executive Summary 2017, Edelman Trust Barometer: Annual Global Study, <http://www.edelman.com/executive-summary/>

A typical example of this is Iraq, whose federalization was a response to deep social divisions that made trust impossible between Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Federalization, however, did not solve the problem. Today, fragmentation is occurring in all three parts of the country, including Iraqi Kurdistan, which was previously considered the least affected by such troubles.

Also, efforts in recent years to use the common fight against terrorism as a basis for consolidating the region have proven essentially futile: not a single player in the Middle East has escaped accusation by someone else of either carrying out or supporting terrorist activity.

Even for all its brutality, the Islamic State did not turn out to be “the perfect enemy” because a host of regional actors considers the organization, if not a lesser evil, then at least a less urgently threatening one than others.

III. Alien Games: on the Role of Global Actors in the Middle East

The 20th-century confrontation between the two ideological and political camps came at a heavy price: it formed a world of mutual exclusion that left the main participants little room for joint action and convinced them that they, alone, were on “the right side of history.”

With the disappearance of the bipolar system of international relations, one of its most important functions was also lost – that of restraining the global actors. If, under that system, either of the sides attempted to break the rules, the result was a very deep and dangerous international crisis. The rivals responded by hitting the brakes to pull back as far as possible from the edge of the abyss of global nuclear war. Those leaders still remembered World War II and felt no temptation to repeat that experience using nuclear weapons: the consequences were all too obvious.

The superpowers shifted their focus to the less dangerous but compelling regional conflicts in which they had allies, and where each sought to improve its position in the respective region. In the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict facilitated this global struggle for influence for many years.

Local conflicts have been so ingrained in global international relations that most of the international community often perceived them as a direct continuation of the confrontation between the two systems, as clashes devoid of their own motivations and cultural identities. Instead, they viewed them more as the result of class struggles rather than as clashes based on nationalism or the competition for resources, territory, or hegemony – causes they could only partially ascribe to ideological underpinnings. It was impossible in principle to ignore the major regional players and their interests – that often differed from those of their global patrons. But even under these

conditions, the decision to end hostilities and start negotiations lay not with local actors, but with those above them who had their own agenda.

The absence of Cold War-era deterrents or a powerful opponent gave the superpower that emerged victorious from the confrontation a dangerous and dizzying sense that even “running a red light” would not entail serious consequences, and that no “trifling regional impediments” ought to thwart its military ambitions. The resultant bombing of sovereign states, the overthrow of undesirable regimes, the creation of ad hoc coalitions operating without a UN Security Council mandate – or else coalitions operating far beyond such mandates – significantly influenced the course and intensity of the regional conflicts, drew additional parties into the fray, and effectively narrowed the maneuvering room available to the global powers themselves. Previously unquestioned norms of international behavior – including the non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, mutual recognition of the opponent’s fairly clearly defined spheres of influence, the desire to preserve the balance of power and to avoid the temptation to cross over the “red line” – are all viewed increasingly as anachronistic.

At the same time, regional players gradually gained in strength and, in the new conditions, began feeling a greater sense of independence. The ever-present ambivalence of their relations with the global powers only deepened. In an attempt to compensate for their dependence on the superpowers, and holding a better understanding of their motivations than those powers had of the logic and motives driving their regional partners, they sought to exploit the disagreements between the competing non-regional forces during the period of bipolarity. The regulatory authority of the superpowers lay in their military might and in their ability to offer themselves as role models whose mores and values the region would want to emulate.

As it turned out, the opening years of the 21st century saw a further erosion of both: the relativism of values, the crisis in the Western model of liberalism, and the unsuccessful experiment in socio-political engineering were accompanied by the emergence of an international terrorism that challenged the military might of the West and undermined its ability to guarantee security.

In these circumstances, the global powers forfeited their role as the regulators of regional conflicts and increasingly became hostages to the regional elite – an extremely dangerous trend that continues to grow ever more alarming today. Intrastate conflicts, while not formally attracting a great deal of international interest, now became vortexes of sorts, pulling in the resources and military forces of regional and global players. At the same time, countless provocations from every side diminish the ability to fight the international terrorism that all global actors more or less equally consider a common threat. All of this aggravates relations between Russia and the West – and primarily between Russia and the U.S. – creating an opportunity for even the most odious of parties in the conflict to exploit that rift to their own advantage.

Just like his predecessor, U.S. President Donald Trump has no desire to increase direct U.S. involvement in the affairs of this troubled and highly unpredictable re-

gion. However, if the effects of the Arab Spring, the destabilization of Iraq and Syria, and the overall deepening of regional conflicts managed to draw the Obama administration into Middle Eastern affairs, then it is possible that Trump could fall into the same trap. It could force him to respond aggressively to any dramatic turns of events as a means of compensating for his weak standing at home and limited electoral base.

The accusations in Washington that Russia interfered in the U.S. elections and had special relations with Trump's associates have become an obstacle to Trump's stated goal of improving U.S.-Russian relations through a joint fight against terrorism in the Middle East, and might also provoke him into making an excessive show of force in that region. The "Russian threat" has become the basis of an unprecedented political alliance between representatives of the Democratic Party and the most conservative wing of the Republican Party, and the constant anti-Russian rhetoric in the media has resulted in 60% of the U.S. population now considering Russia an enemy.¹ Despite the fact that Trump won the election, the campaign battle continues now under new conditions.

On the one hand, the new president's inexperience in foreign affairs and lack of knowledge of the Middle East prompted him to make a series of hasty statements that are fundamentally at odds with the traditional U.S. approach. Specifically, he hinted at the possibility of relocating the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and promised "not to insist" on the "two states for two groups of people" formula as part of a settlement of the Palestinian problem. On the other hand, by surrounding himself with retired military personnel who have served in "hot spots" in the Near and Middle East, Trump will undoubtedly continue to resort to drastic measures in the region – such as shelling a Syrian air base with Tomahawk missiles in response to a chemical incident in Khan Shaykhun. That move was intended not only as a warning to Syrian President Bashar Assad – whose fate, prior to that, concerned Donald Trump much less than did the fight against terrorism – as well as to other leaders, including those outside the region.

President Trump's approach to the Middle East, if not indicating a fundamental change in U.S. policy, has introduced at the very least a number of new and sometimes disturbing elements to it. For now, the U.S. is sending out "mixed signals" by demonstrating its willingness to employ the direct use of force while also not abandoning the joint fight against terrorism.

The U.S. and Russia take vastly different positions on the Middle East. The Trump administration has expressed growing dissatisfaction with pro-government forces in Syria, especially Iran and Hezbollah. The announcement by the White House that it is ready to impose new sanctions on Tehran – this time because of its missile program – and reconsider the P5+1 agreement impels Washington to demand that Russia revise its cooperation with Iran and to persuade Tehran to drastically reduce

¹ Telhami S., Rouse S. American Politics and Foreign Policy. University of Maryland Crystal Issues Poll. Study #2.

its presence in Syria. What's more, Washington has issued something of an ultimatum concerning its desire that Russia scale back its ties with Iran.

Of course, Russia and Iran have very different interests in Syria. According to a number of participants in the Valdai Discussion Club Middle East conference, Iran's goals conflict somewhat with those of Russia in that Tehran is attempting to achieve a military victory, gain a foothold in Syria by establishing military bases and acquiring property there, and following its dominating passion of achieving universal support for the Shiite part of the Muslim population in the Middle East.

Despite their obvious differences, Russia and the U.S. continue to share a limited set of interests and, thus, an area for potential cooperation in the Middle East. This includes the settlement process in Syria (in the Geneva format, and to a certain extent, the attendant Astana format), and either the joint or parallel fight against two groups officially recognized as terrorist organizations by the UN: the Islamic State and the Jabhat al-Nusra Front.

A number of participants of the Valdai Discussion Club Middle East conference believe that it would make no sense for Trump to up the bar of U.S. military responses in the region, and the inevitable cooling off the current furor over "Russia's responsibility" for the U.S. election results could create conditions for substantial U.S.-Russian cooperation – especially considering that both states have little choice but to cooperate on the Middle East. Such cooperation could include the exchange of military information, reaching a common vision for the future of the Syrian state, approaches to the problem of the Syrian Kurds, achieving a ceasefire, providing support for Syrian authorities at the grassroots, and ensuring the survival of people in territories recovering from the ravages of war.

In practice, Russia and the U.S. have provided whatever military response and political dialogue was needed in the Middle East, leaving almost no room for the European Union, whose Middle East policy increasingly lacks the originality and independent character normally associated with a collective international body. At the same time, Moscow cannot but be concerned of the possibility that, after the terrorist groups in the region are defeated, the U.S. administration could demand that Russia shoulder the main burden of engineering Syria's recovery.

IV. Sworn Brothers: on the Policies of Regional Actors

Given the behavior of the actors in the region, it is no wonder that global players have proven unable to formulate a predictable and well-defined political strategy for the Middle East. Feeling free to act, but without always knowing the limits of their ambitions – and lacking both the experience and often the means for achiev-

ing those objectives – they distrust one another while actively pursuing foreign policies – at times emotional and risk-laden – that create threats both for themselves and the region as a whole.

The participants in the region’s conflicts fall into three main groups. The first includes the most powerful states in the region – Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. These actively influence the situation and use conflicts to pursue their own objectives, while at the same time modifying traditional alliances with the global players according to the situation. The members of this group have their own agendas, are willing to act decisively, and face few restrictions other than domestic challenges and the risk of seriously damaging relations with each other. These states gained prominence when Egypt, Syria, and Iraq – long the leading powers in the region – rapidly waned in strength.

The second group includes three less active states that are nonetheless influential in regional relations: Egypt, Jordan, and Qatar – whose positions will determine, to varying degrees, the prospects for stabilizing the balance of forces among their conflict-ridden neighboring states.

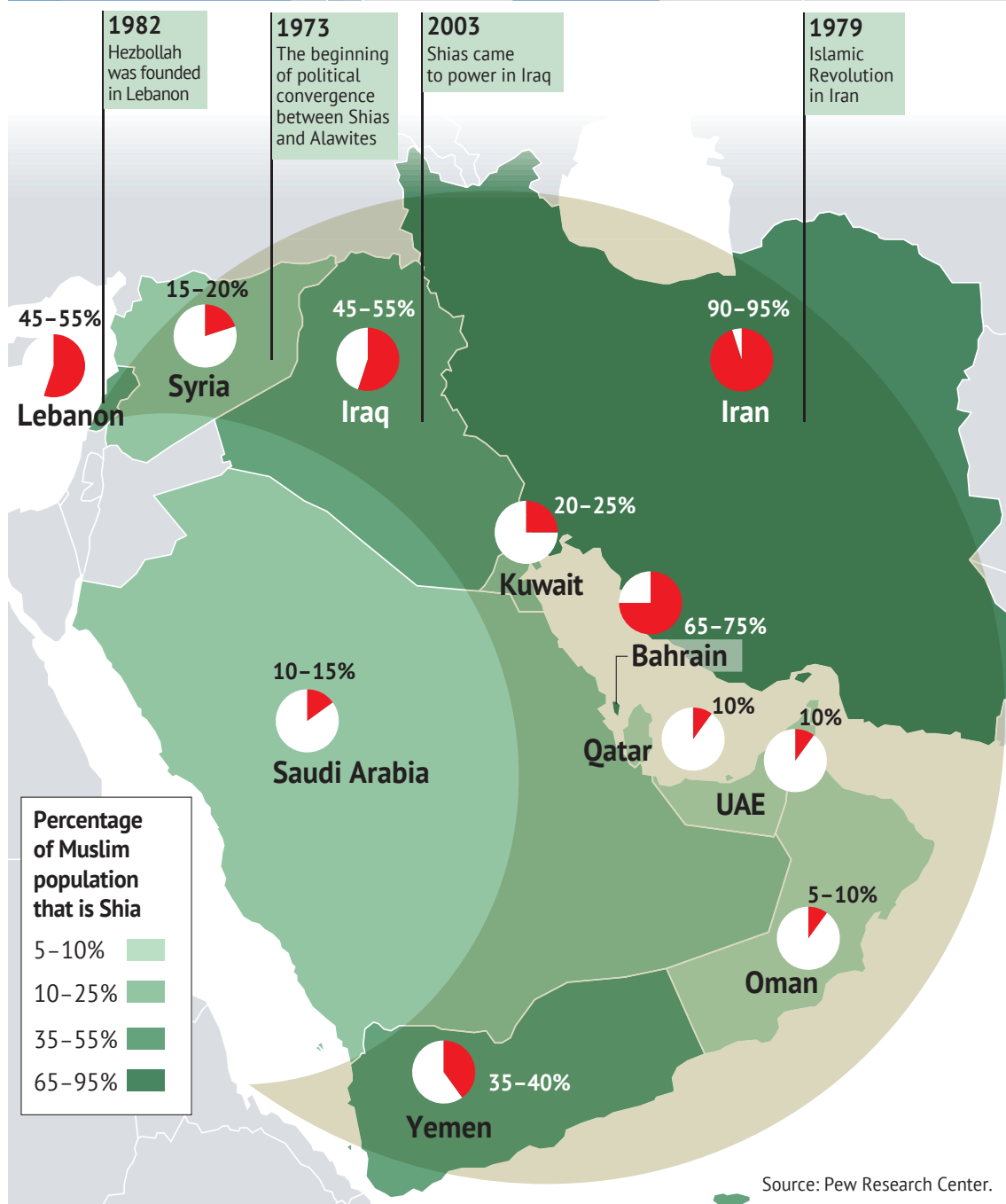
Finally, the third group includes Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. These states are in the process of losing their sovereignty and identity as independent states, the result not only of active interventions by outside forces, but also of their own weakness and attempts to hide behind the backs of others. Neither the Iraqi nor the Syrian authorities issue public statements about their vision for the future, the fight against terrorism, their response to provocations, or their reaction to the deaths of their own citizens. Their detachment from events – or the excessively late reaction from those who are charged with responding immediately to them – inevitably raises the question: To what extent do regional elites see their dependence on global players as an opportunity to shift responsibility for events onto their shoulders?

This is likely true not only of the weakest group, that is immersed in their own conflicts, but also of the strongest actors, who are unlikely to show a willingness to take real responsibility for the consequences of their actions. There is practically no historical precedent for such behavior in the Middle East.

The “Turkish model” of development grew less attractive after the defeat of “political Islam” in Egypt and the increase in tensions both within Turkey and between Turkey and its neighbors – although the country retains the military might to influence the situation in the region through force. A sort of vacuum of “soft power” and political influence has resulted. Iran, by contrast, has consistently strengthened its position within the “fertile crescent,” relying on the levers of power concentrated in the hands of the Shiite majority in Iraq, on its now stronger alliance with Damascus and the Lebanese Hezbollah, and on the historically inherent role of Shiite Islam as the spokesman for popular discontent over the injustices of the ruling authorities.

Saudi Arabia perceives all of this as part of a plan for a “Shiite belt” that would encircle the Holy sites of Islam and undermine the foundations of the Saudi mon-

SHIA CRESCENT



archy, including via the Shia minority concentrated in the east and southwest of the country. The ruling elite of the Gulf states view the Shiite protests within their countries as purely the result of outside influence.

To create a counterweight to “Iranian expansion,” the Arab Gulf states tried to quickly hammer together a Sunni military-political bloc that would wrest Syria, Iraq, and Yemen from Iran’s orbit of influence and prevent the internal destabilization of their monarchies. However, the fact that GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) states perceive the Iranian factor differently and advocate correspondingly different approaches has proven a limiting factor to this strategy. Whereas Bahrain and Saudi Arabia see Iran as a threat, Oman and Kuwait are less concerned and are prepared to offer a softer approach than the alarmism of the Saudis.

Most of the Valdai Discussion Club Middle East conference participants agree that, without an end to the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, it is practically impossible to break the vicious cycle of terrorism and civil violence in the region. However, with both countries acting simultaneously as nation-states and as a source of competing messianic religious ideologies, the distrust between them is so deep that attempts by more than 20 countries, NGOs, organizations, and individuals to mediate their dispute have produced no discernible result.

That said, despite the continuing conflicts and the growing weariness of an international community burdened by their heavy consequences, certain prerequisites exist for achieving package agreements. In Syria and Yemen, both of the warring states are depleting their financial and military resources. (What’s more, the U.N. estimates that six years of involvement in the Syrian war has cost Iran \$35 bn U.S.) The growing cost of the conflicts, the uncertainty over how to settle them, and the decline in oil prices, have all aggravated the economic situation. For Iran – that is directly involved in the war in Syria just as Saudi Arabia is embroiled in Yemen – a prolongation of the Syrian crisis could lead to greater pressure from the U.S. and, possibly, the introduction of new U.S. sanctions. The Trump administration has taken a hard line towards Iran and made it clear that it would hold Tehran accountable for its behavior in the region and its implementation of the nuclear agreement. Both states have ambitious plans for economic development and thus have an interest in creating a favorable environment for foreign investment – a goal directly tied to creating the architecture for regional security.

Moreover, the conflict has escalated to the point where all the parties involved are beginning to realize that their desired objectives are increasingly unattainable, motivating them to start looking for ways to conclude a peace without losing face.

However, despite the many arguments in favor of de-escalation, the new U.S. policy could undermine that process even before it begins. The Trump administration’s anti-Iranian course could weaken the hand of the moderate wing of the Iranian establishment while giving unfounded hope to the leaders of the Arab monarchies. In time, this could cause the confrontation to reach a new stage marked by heightened existential fear on both sides.

The new trends in U.S. policies have an impact on Israel, that considers them a return to a more favorable course. Having secured the demonstrative support of the White House and concerned almost exclusively with ensuring its own security, Israel can pursue a relatively unrestrained military policy in Syria, striking elements of Hezbollah – that has gained valuable military experience and new weapons in that conflict – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and even units of the Syrian army. Even if the Israeli command does not get carried away with its military strikes, it will still attempt to exert a solid enough presence in the skies over Syria to prevent the enemy from consolidating its position in the Golan Heights.

A new factor in this equation might be Turkey, where, in spite of the repression that followed the failed coup attempt, almost half of the most progressive members of society oppose Recep Tayyip Erdogan and any extension of his powers. Experts think Erdogan might use his foreign policy success as an additional tool for mobilization. Deepening concerns over the Kurdish issue could prompt Ankara to act more aggressively in areas where it sees an opening, a move that could, in turn, sour Turkey's relations with the U.S., and possibly, with Russia. Unhappy that the major powers are reluctant to take their interests in Syria into account, the Turkish authorities might sanction a military operation in northwestern Iraq close to the Turkish border. And, whereas the U.S. and Russia share a common interest in Syria regarding the issue of the Kurds – thus compelling Turkey to halt its Operation Euphrates Shield – their interests in Iraq diverge, meaning that the U.S. will have to stand alone there against Turkish ambitions. In any case, Erdogan's intention to use his foreign policy resources as a means for furthering his own ambitions might make him a less desirable partner for both Washington and Moscow.

In general, the growing ambitions of the regional powers coupled with their dependence on global players make the system of relations in the region increasingly uncertain. It is difficult to assess how the regional elites define the limits of their maneuvers and how thoughtfully they operate within those limits. They might interpret the policy of the new U.S. administration as a signal allowing them greater license in their own actions, although the steps Trump has taken during his first 100 days in office would suggest otherwise.

This growing uncertainty not only makes it more difficult to reach a political settlement of the conflict, but also poses a threat that new conflict zones could appear with the destabilization of what are as yet stable states. Under these conditions, the economic development of the region takes on added importance. On the one hand, the economic difficulties that a number of countries are experiencing make them especially vulnerable to various challenges and threats arising from the current situation. On the other hand, buttressing the economic system and moving toward a post-conflict restoration of those countries whose economies were ruined by war could pave the way to stabilizing the situation and reducing the level of conflict in the region.

V. NER: the New Economic Reality of The Middle East

Today, six years after the Arab Spring ushered in hopes of a deep transformation in the Middle East, the new social contract between the state and society – along with what were hopes for the rapid redistribution of wealth – have yet to occur. What's more, this applies in varying degrees to all the countries of the region, whether or not their political regimes were institutionalized after a revolutionary change in power (Tunisia and Egypt), or the authorities themselves initiated reforms under control from above in order to adapt to the new reality (Morocco, Jordan, Algeria). As it turned out, the political elite and their opponents in both sets of countries were far more prepared to engage in political and legislative maneuvering to ease tensions than they were to implement systemic socio-economic reforms.

The overall rise in tensions has put those states that have managed to preserve their stability in an extremely difficult situation. On the one hand, there is an obvious need for both economic and substantial political reforms. On the other hand, opportunities for implementing such reforms are limited, the reforms would not produce immediate positive results, and the rise in social tensions that might accompany them could spark a new round of violence. Governments feel very vulnerable against the backdrop of such negative conditions in the region, and therefore act with extreme caution.

The situation is especially challenging for Egypt, where, in spite of all the previous reforms, the government sector retains its dominant position. The military regime is trying to disassociate itself from those representatives of big business that put political pressure on the authorities and who were symbols of corruption under President Hosni Mubarak. The army is taking on an increasing number of economic functions, behaving like an independent commercial corporation with its own budget and a reliance on former military personnel who have become entrepreneurs. At the same time, the authorities are looking for new support among market-oriented big businesses that have no direct ties to government agencies.

The unstable domestic situation complicates the implementation of reforms in Egypt and Tunisia. In response to the unremitting terrorist activity – and sometimes using it as a pretext – the Egyptian, and to a lesser extent, Tunisian authorities employ measures restricting civil liberties. In Egypt, this has caused a backlash from the very political forces that brought the army to power in July 2013.

A number of Valdai Discussion Club experts anticipate a trend toward a “new authoritarianism” as a necessarily valid means by which governments can reliably implement urgently needed economic reforms.

The flood of Syrian refugees has depressed the economies of Lebanon and Jordan. In Lebanon, where Syrians now comprise 20% of the population, it has become an urgent problem that Prime Minister Saad Hariri has characterized as a “ticking time

bomb”. Largely due to the influx of Syrian refugees, Jordan’s population grew by as much during five years of the Syrian war (2011–2015) as it had in the 15 previous years. Under such conditions, real GDP growth has slowed over the last two years, and per capita GDP growth has hovered near zero since 2012.¹

The changing situation in the world oil market only complicates the implementation of domestic reforms capable of producing at least some discernible effect – a possibility already hindered by internal instability and the conflict-ridden external environment. When oil prices were high, some of the windfall profits enjoyed by the oil-exporting Arab states served in one way or another as a source of growth for the whole region, but with prices now low and volatile, even the oil-exporting states are experiencing serious financial difficulties. Their participation in the economic reconstruction of the region is in serious doubt because incessant internal strife is destroying some (Iraq and Libya), while others (the Arab Gulf states, and especially Saudi Arabia) are directly or indirectly involved in costly conflicts beyond their borders. As a result, the region’s already huge outlays for arms jumped by 12% between 2012 and 2016.

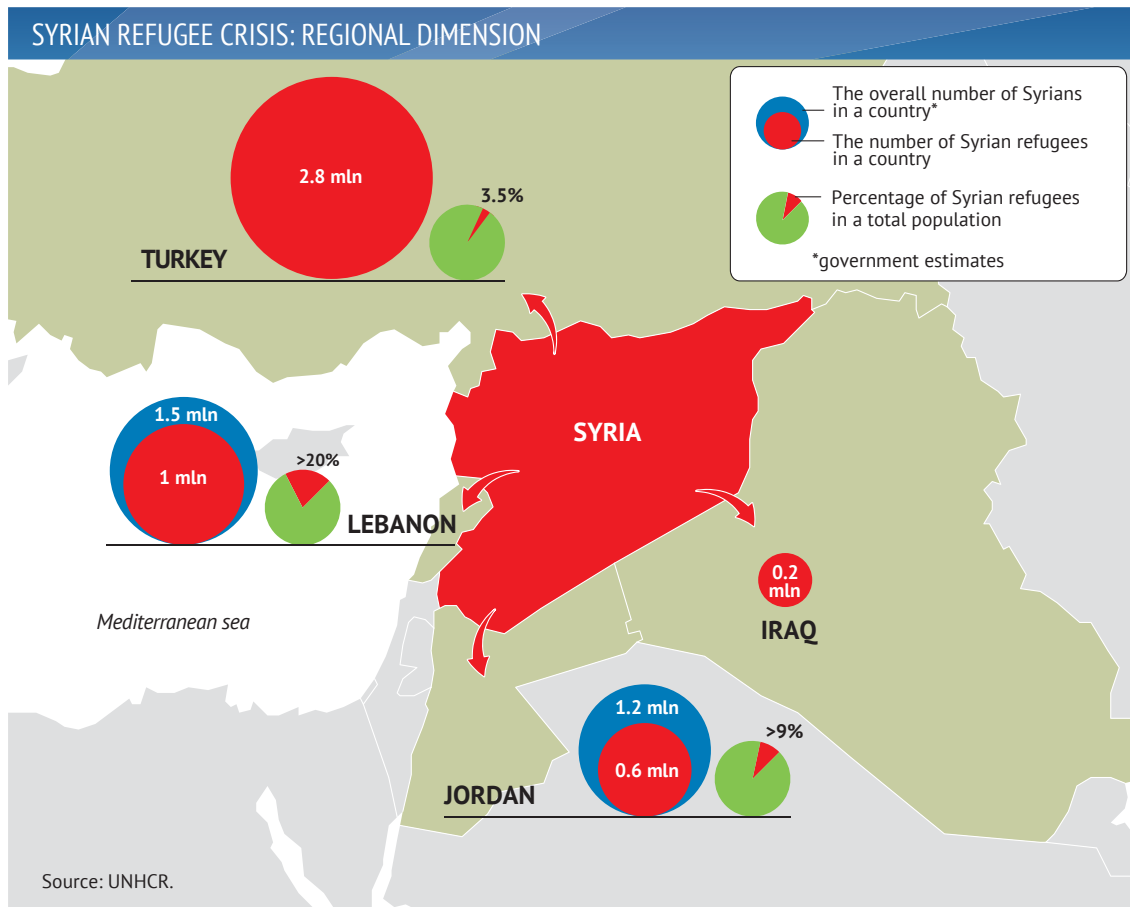
According to the IMF, combined revenues for the Persian Gulf Arab states fell by \$350 bn in 2014–2016, while combined deficits for the GCC reached a record \$153 bn in 2016, up from \$119 bn in 2015. Saudi Arabia accounts for almost half of that figure. Arab economists predict that the debt will fall in the coming years, but that it is unlikely to dip below \$100 bn before 2021.² Algeria, although not involved directly in any armed conflicts, is experiencing significant financial difficulties. For the second consecutive year, leaders had to make drastic budget cuts, paring down to a budget of just \$63 bn in 2017, as compared to \$110 bn in 2015.

The changing situation in the world oil market and increased domestic spending has forced Saudi Arabia to implement what are possibly the first drastic economic reforms in its modern history. Traditionally, the oil monarchy has viewed the state as the authorized distributor of wealth. It ensured political stability largely by providing the money needed to keep wages high in the bloated public sector and security structures (providing twice the funding allocated to the private sector), and subsidizing the price of goods, education, and medical services, as well as other social and public needs. That is why the ruling family’s first reaction to the growing wave of protests in the Arab world was for the Saudi king to declare a major “social package” worth \$129 bn of spending over several years. That is more than half of what the kingdom earns annually from oil exports.

The Saudi government has announced a new “Vision 2030” economic plan involving a series of reforms that seek to shift the country away from state patronage and a reliance on energy exports towards a modern, technology-oriented

¹ Nemeh B. Jordan’s Burden, Carnegie Middle East Center. March 21, 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/68330>

² Economic Prospects and Policy Challenges for the GCC Countries, IMF, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/eng/2016/102616b.pdf>



manufacturing economy. It aims to achieve this transition by cutting the cost of the state machinery, accelerating the diversification of the economy, partially privatizing the public sector – including Aramco, the Saudi “oil empire” – reducing subsidies and expanding the private sector. In other words, the monarchy plans to change the terms of the social contract and to implement structural reforms in the economy – a serious test in itself, even if the existing political landscape remains unchanged. The planned reforms include legislative and administrative measures to limit the number of immigrant workers. This would lead to a significant drop in financial flows to other Arab countries – especially to Egypt that currently receives more from such transfers than from foreign investment.

However, Middle East experts point out that purely economic restructuring alone is unlikely to achieve the stated goals of the plan. As soon as the conditions of the social contract inherent in a “rentier” economy and state paternalism began to change, the need will eventually arise to build an inclusive political system – for which the “Vision 2030” makes no provision. A privatization program

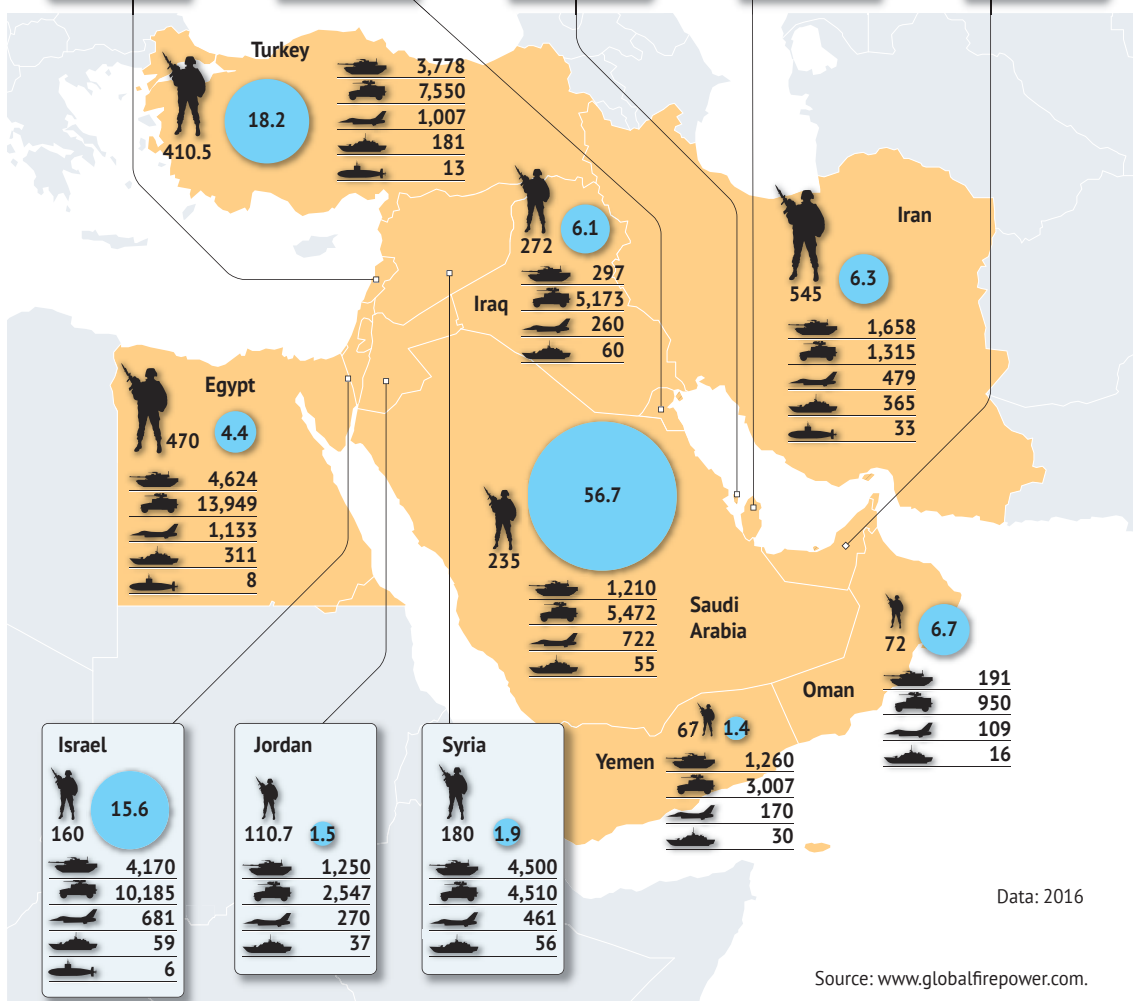
MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES

Active Frontline
Personnel
(th. servicemen)Defense
Budget
(bln \$)

Tanks

Armored Fighting
Vehicles (AFVs)Total Aircraft (fixed-
wing and rotary-wing)Total Naval
Strength

Submarines



and expansion of the private sector will inevitably lead to an increase in the size of the middle class and the appearance of new social strata that will demand that their interests receive representation in the structures of authority that are currently monopolized by the ruling family. Leaders will also have to consider introducing some religious freedoms to their hardline version of official Islam, at least to those facets that currently deter foreign investors. Despite several religious reforms enacted to appease Western allies in the first years after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the legislative system still grants the king and supreme religious hierarchy wide latitude to interpret Islamic norms based on political expediency. For example, the anti-terrorism law of January 31, 2014 classified atheism as an act of terrorism, and Royal Decree No. 44 of February 3, 2014 defines membership in such religious-political groups as Ansarullah and the Muslim Brotherhood as a criminal offense – the same as membership in al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations.

Although the specific circumstances of the economic crisis and the measures needed to overcome it differ from country to country, there is a need for a region-wide economic recovery plan, as well as for all concerned to work together to address the risks associated with implementing it. However, the need to restore the economies of countries beset by armed conflict is perhaps an even more important element of such cooperation.

VI. The Phoenix Reborn: on the Prospects for Post-Conflict Reconstruction

The laws of a war economy prevail in large areas of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, where the system of governance is either weakened or entirely absent. Such an economy only exacerbates socio-economic degradation by effectively financing terrorism and various shadow structures that have no interest in transitioning to peaceful development. Such war economies apply “taxes” to every form of trade, transit, shipping, humanitarian convoy, and everything that passes through the area controlled by one or another party to the conflict. When a non-state actor thus monopolizes that trade over some time, it can introduce a more traditional system of taxation. For example, at the peak of its power in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State managed to create a fairly complex system for taxing the population that generated \$600 mln in revenues in 2014.

War economies are inextricably linked to such anti-social phenomena as rampant smuggling and trafficking of everything up to and including weapons on the “black market”, as well as with robbery, extortion, and kidnapping people and valuable cultural artifacts. The trade in oil, gas, cement, phosphoric acid, phosphate, cereals

and cotton brought the Islamic State some \$2.2 bn in Syria and Iraq.¹ Those revenues dropped off sharply after the start of Russia's operations in Syria and the intensification of the fight against the Islamic State.

However, no war economy that arises in the wake of the destruction of normal institutions – however profitable it may be for individual participants in the conflict – is able to provide for the normal functioning of society. As a result, all of the acute problems of world development – poverty, food shortages, inadequate medical care, and water scarcity – have taken on the dimension of humanitarian catastrophes in the conflict zones of the Middle East. According to the latest UN FAO data, 30 million inhabitants of the Middle East and Northern Africa do not meet international food safety criteria. The people in one-third of Yemen's 22 provinces are on the verge of starvation. Malnutrition affects 70% of the families in Syria. During the war, 80% of Syrians fell below the poverty line and average life expectancy there fell by 20 years.²

Of all the centers of conflict in the Middle East, Syria has suffered the greatest losses in terms of material damage, loss of life, and decline in human capital. Material damages totaled an estimated \$325.5 bn in 2011–2016. Of that sum, \$227.5 bn represents losses from the real decline in GDP plus lost profits compared to what the Syrian government had planned for GDP size in 2016, as well as \$100 bn of direct damage to property. Plans had called for the GDP to increase by 40% during those years, but instead it fell by 56% due to the war. The budget deficit has grown more than 14-fold, with expenses shooting up by 56% even while revenues plummeted by 66%. Most of the property damage involves built structures, the processing and mining industries, and electricity and water supply facilities. Industrial and agricultural production decreased by 40% and 64% respectively, and legal trade dropped by 68%.³ According to calculations presented by Abdallah Al Dardari (Deputy Prime Minister for Economic Affairs of Syria, 2005–2011), only an investment of \$1 trillion and 10 years of peace could restore the Syrian economy to the pre-war level of 2010. What's more, even if the conflict were to end today, the country's economy is already 17 years behind where it stood prior to the war.

In late 2016, both OPEC and non-OPEC oil exporters showed a broad common interest in keeping oil prices high. The fact that Russia and Saudi Arabia played a key role in reaching an agreement to stabilize the oil market should help them restore mutual trust and overcome political differences, particularly with regard to the Syrian conflict. At the same time, the stabilization of oil prices alone will hardly prove sufficient to untangle the Gordian Knot of problems in the Middle East. It has become clear over time that economic problems, and the socio-economic issues connected

¹ <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/ig-ot-bezumnoy-idei-k-kollapsu-ekonomiki/>

² Document of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, "National Agenda for the future of Syria," Strategic Policy Alternatives Framework, in Arabic, p. 18.

³ Ibid., pp. 12–16, <http://css.escwa.org.lb/spaf-final24-1-2017.pdf>

with them, will burden all peacekeeping efforts. At the same time, outside assistance from states and international organizations is slowing due to the lack of progress in reaching a political settlement. For example, in its declared Middle East strategy, the European Union has made its participation in the reconstruction of Syria's economy dependent on the achievement of an agreement to organize a transition period in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions, thereby creating a sort of vicious circle.

Today, it is obvious that the development of a coordinated plan for the economic rehabilitation of the region must become a top priority of the entire international community. It marks a convergence of interests that could facilitate the harmonizing of multilateral actions on the political track into a single stabilization package.

The escalation of armed violence and the resultant humanitarian disasters have reached the point where all parties to the conflict are beginning to understand that it will be impossible for them to achieve their hoped-for objectives. This creates the conditions needed for reaching compromises. Putting economic instruments into play could strengthen this trend, providing the missing incentives for progress towards a political settlement.

The financial losses and destruction in the region have reached such proportions that, given the state of the world economy, achieving economic recovery for the conflict-torn areas has become unfeasible for any single state. Moreover, the negative consequences of such a prolonged destabilization of the Middle East are spreading to an ever-greater number of countries beyond the region, threatening the security of not only Europe, but also the entire Euro-Atlantic area. Most Middle East dialogue participants believe that combining financial and economic resources to rebuild the region would be a worthwhile "investment" in the "common good," one that could help curtail the uncontrolled flight of refugees, and aid in the fight against international terrorism and extremist ideologies.

Purely economic considerations of the global order also point to the need for international cooperation. Whatever changes might take place in world politics, the Middle East will retain its long-term importance as the planet's main source of non-renewable energy resources. According to the International Energy Agency, demand for oil tends to rise, and the Middle East will remain a leading supplier even if the U.S. increases the volume of its shale oil production. As evidence, Japan Bank for International Cooperation representatives report that more than half of that country's oil imports come from the Middle East, in spite of Tokyo's many efforts to diversify its suppliers of raw materials.

In practical terms, now is the time to start preparing for the post-conflict period by putting in place the complex mechanisms of international economic coordination. This is possible by giving added "economic weight" to UN Security Council resolutions on settlements for Syria, Yemen, and Libya. The economic stimulus package could include the efforts of specialized UN organizations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank,

and other international financial institutions. A number of experts also note that, as the conflict-torn areas eventually conclude peace agreements, there will be a need to include private capital from the region and world markets in the structure of this plan. According to Abdallah Al Dardari, Syrian businesspeople living abroad hold combined capital totaling \$100 bn.

An important part of multilateral efforts over the long term is the provision of humanitarian aid – thanks to which most of the Yemeni population and a large number of Libyan citizens survive. Syria alone, according to experts, requires a staggering \$20 bn in humanitarian aid.

In spite of the general consensus that the Middle East is experiencing the largest humanitarian disaster since the Second World War, the international community has so far been unable to formulate a coordinated policy to remedy the situation. Instead, its actions remain fragmented and largely politicized. Participants at international donor conferences in London and Brussels made impressive pledges to provide humanitarian assistance. Such promises, however, often remain only on paper or go largely unfulfilled – even by wealthy states. For example, of the \$200 mln that Saudi Arabia pledged at the London conference in 2016, Riyadh has given only \$27 mln to date, and China has given only \$3 mln of the \$35 mln it pledged.¹

The economic component of conflict settlement and of building a system for regional security are gaining increasing importance as a motivating impulse for finding a political solution for the entire region. Reconstruction of the Middle East – and especially Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya, the hotbeds of conflict – and giving its people a chance for a decent life could serve as a point of converging interests, as an overarching idea on which collective international efforts could focus.

¹ Who really paid up to help Syria? BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/education-38896547>

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 re-

forms 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.

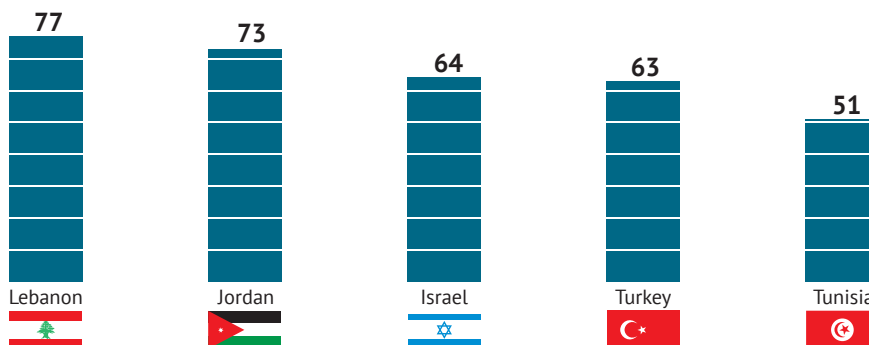
For example, the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has increased by nearly 150 percent since 2011 in Morocco, by over 100 percent in Tunisia and by 50 percent in Jordan. The number of NGOs in Algeria has not increased significantly, yet, it has always been considerable. In all of these 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.

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.

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 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 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.

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

8 Greater Sahara (ISGS) Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali

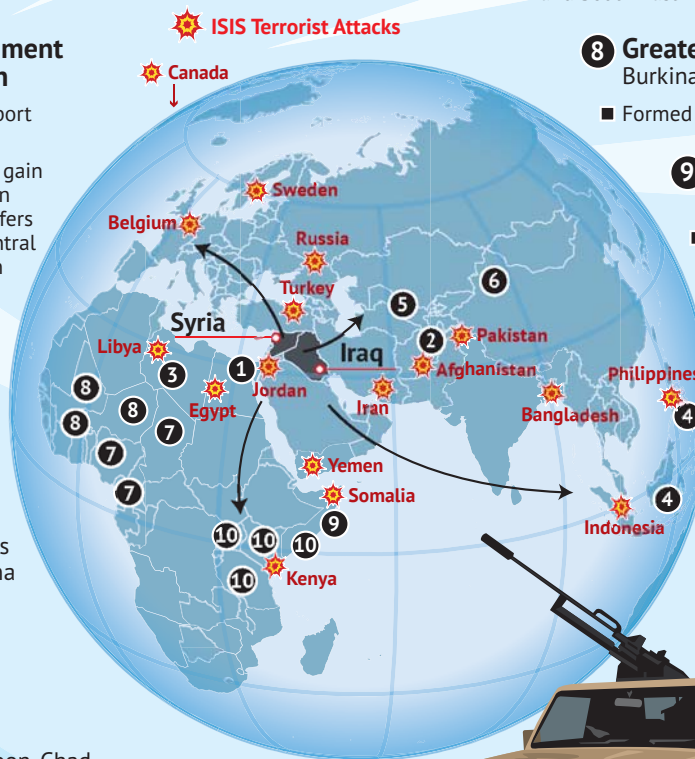
- Formed in 2013

9 Abnaa ul-Calipha Somalia

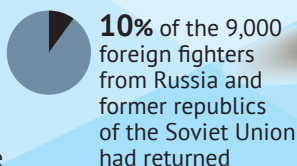
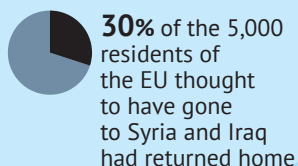
- Emerged in 2015 when it broke away from al-Shabaab

10 ISSSKTU Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda

- A splinter group of al-Shabaab



July 2017



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

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 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 politi-

cal 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.

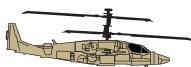
9. The Palestinian problem is back on the agenda

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,

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



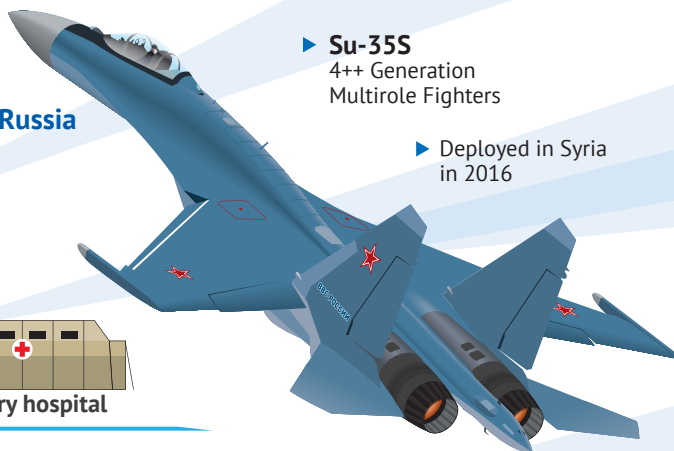
Special forces unit and military police



Military hospital

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

► Deployed in Syria in 2016



Will remain in Syria

Permanent bases



Hmeimim



Tartus

■ Damascus

Aviation



Air-Defense systems



Engineering troops



Number of flights

Aircraft



6,956

Helicopters



>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

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.

Russia in the Middle East: playing on all fields

May 2018

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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 chal-

lenges 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.

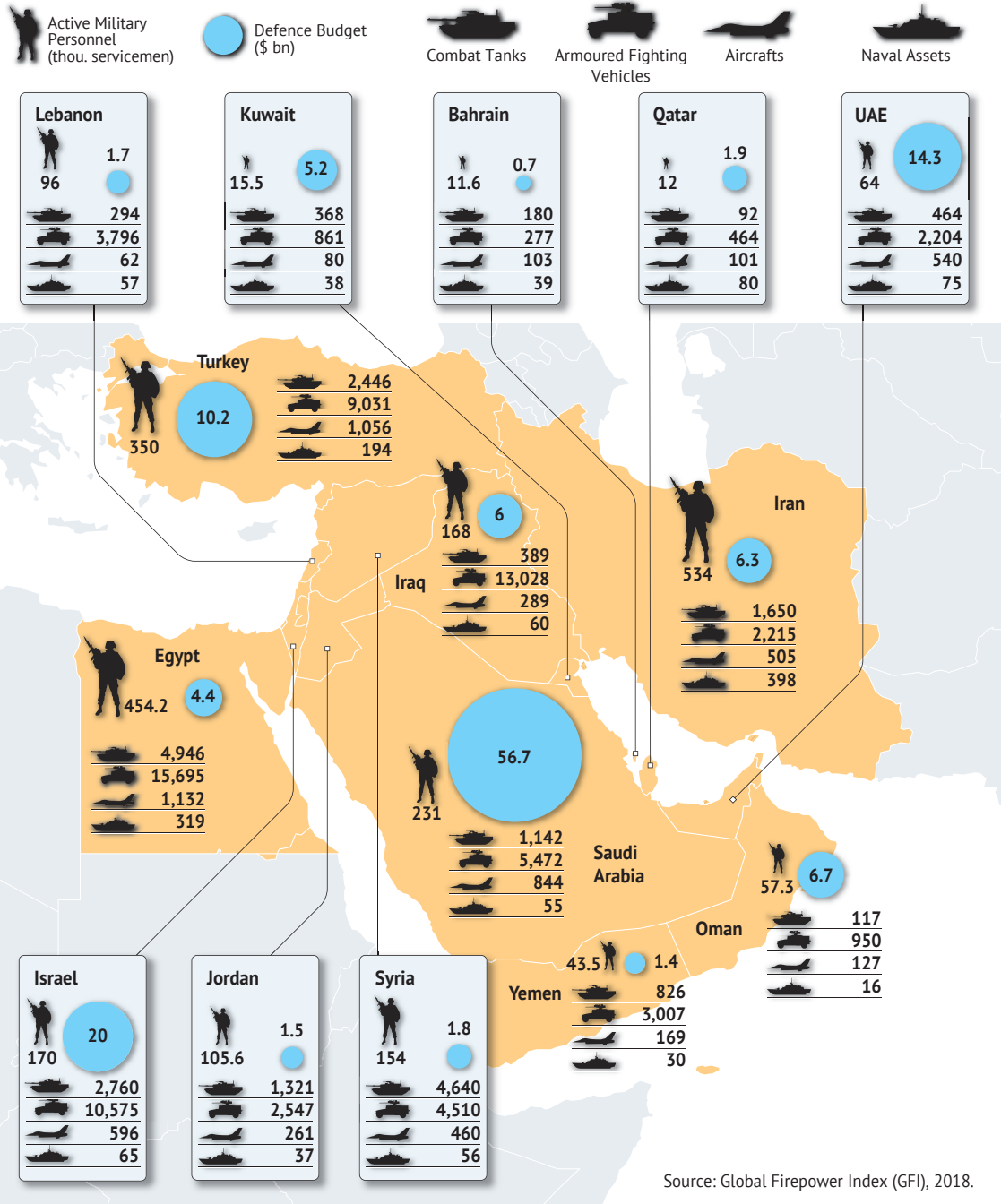
This situation causes external actors to pay increasing attention to the need for economic reconstruction of the three countries. We are witnessing an implicit departure from the initial international consensus that a peace settlement should be a condition for implementing reconstruction programmes. 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.

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES



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 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 ter-

rorist 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 when-

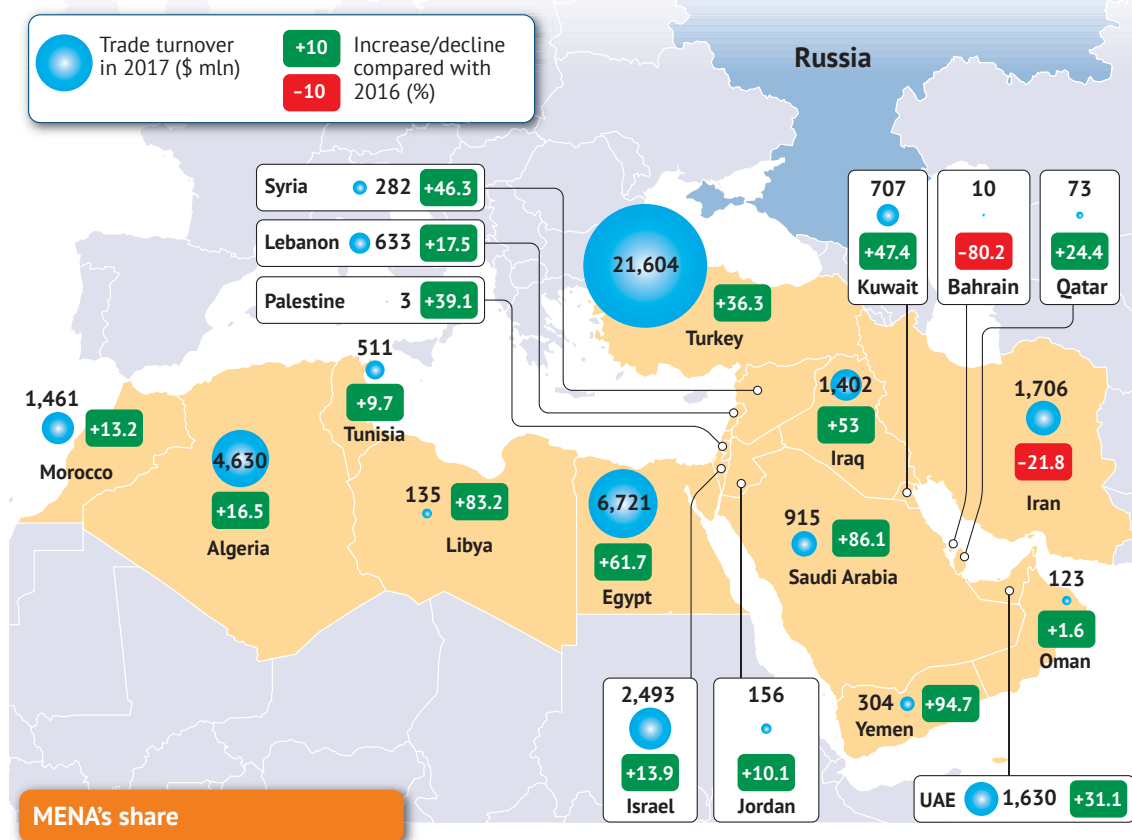
ever the region's future is discussed. This may have mixed consequences. In countries with unstable political systems, such uncertainty does not allow participants in the political process to build long-term development strategies. It conduces to political egoism and opportunistic behaviour on the part 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.

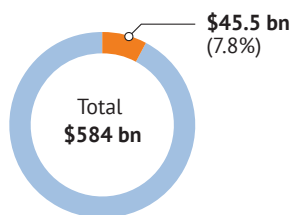
So far, elites of Kurdish-populated countries have viewed their struggle for self-determination as a challenge to territorial integrity of these countries, and Kurdish leaders as separatists. Realizing that the crisis gives them a historical opportunity, if not to gain statehood, then raise their international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

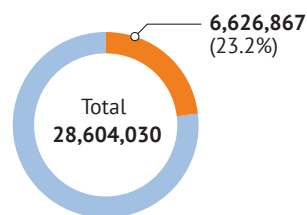
RUSSIA'S TRADE WITH THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES IN 2017



in Russia's trade turnover

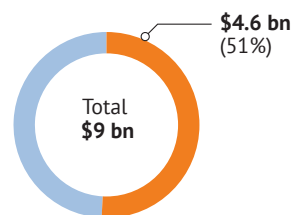


in Russians' total trips outside post-Soviet space



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.

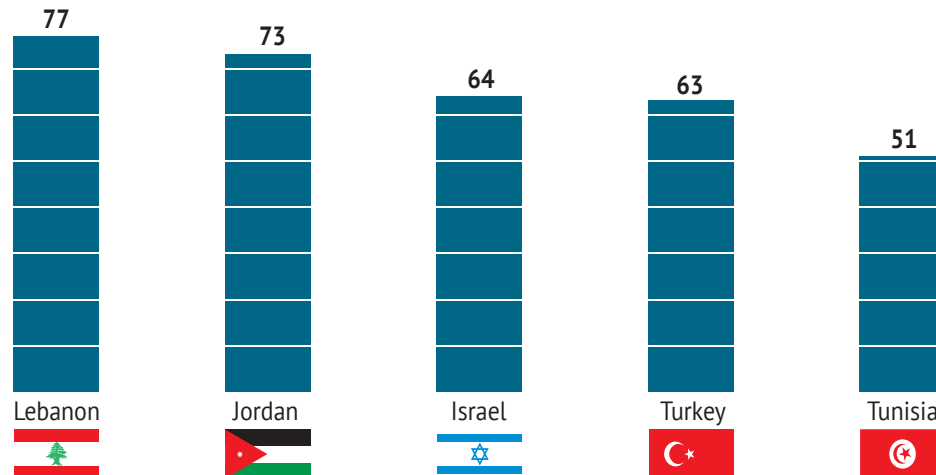
It is important that the new role of the Russian Federation is perceived with understanding by many countries and even non-state players in the region, who are genetically accustomed to the existence of an external system of checks and balances and who used to feel uncomfortable in its absence. Russia 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 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 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.

Russia's portfolio of defence orders from Middle East countries in 2017 amounted to \$8 billion.¹

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

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>

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 shell-

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



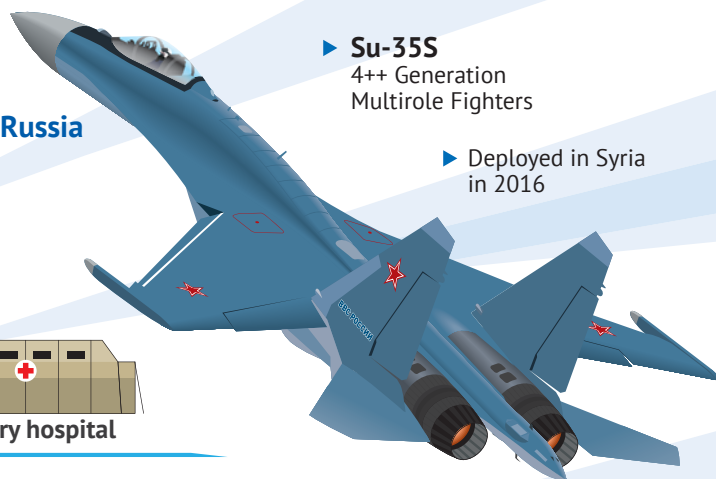
Special forces unit and military police



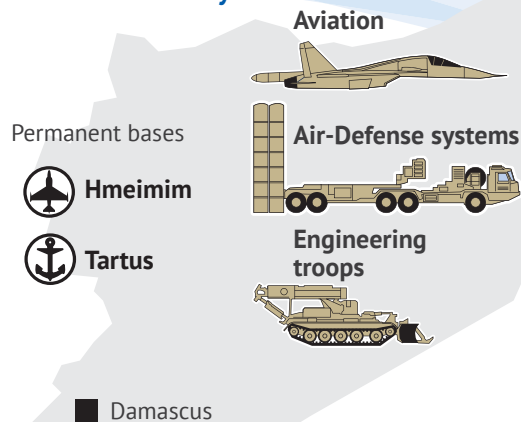
Military hospital

► **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

Sources: News agencies.

ing 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 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 state-ness. 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-rich 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 sub-region 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.¹ 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 energy² and, according to some sources,³ supplies of S-400 systems and Su-32 and Su-

¹ 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/>

² '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>

³ 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

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.

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.

The Syrian Crisis: A Thorny Path from War to Peace

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The second decade of the 21st century began with a string of explosive protests in the Middle East and North Africa, which have destabilized not only the countries that saw violent regime change but the entire region. A way out of the profound systemic crisis is yet to be found. Most countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia) have launched the needed socioeconomic reforms, albeit belatedly, but outcomes are difficult to predict. In other parts of the Arab world (Syria, Libya, Yemen), civil war has been the means of resolving questions of power. In these countries there is an inextricable tangle of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' governments, numerous militias, terrorist groups, and foreign military contingents, which constitute the covert and overt tools of a new kind of geopolitical rivalry.

As a result, the region remains a source of violence and terrorism, dramatic national upheavals, humanitarian catastrophes on a global scale, and waves of migration. The price of revolutions, the resultant devastation and foreign interference proved too high and relapses cannot be ruled out.

What Sets This Conflict Apart

The Syrian crisis, while reflecting the general grievous state of the Greater Middle East, is still a special case resulting from profound changes in the alignment of forces at the global and regional level as well as the nature of ongoing global processes that do not point in one clear direction. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the majority of the 21st century's geopolitical, ideological, social, and ethno-religious cataclysms have been concentrated in precisely this region.

The US and European 'regime change' strategy in former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, and finally Ukraine drew the dividing lines between Russia and the West. There is a yawning gap between the *fait accompli* politics and political expediency, on the one hand, and the key principles (national sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, and non-use of force outside of the framework and procedures established by the UN Charter) of the world order, established after the Second World War, on the other. Dramatic international debates have also focused on the legal grounds for depriving regimes detested by this or that group of states of international legal status.

The conflict in Syria unfolded in a historical period where Russia–US relations were slowly but surely deteriorating from the erstwhile partnership of the late 1990s and early 2000s to a Cold War confrontational model bearing some new features. The generally accepted norms of international law were unilaterally revised, while a collective crisis settlement mechanism advocated by Russia never materialized. As the President of Russia suggested at the Valdai Forum in 2014, this mechanism might include a 'coherent system of reciprocal commitments

and agreements’ and ‘clear-cut conditions under which interference is necessary and legitimate.’¹

The protracted Syrian crisis has presented the international community with a major dilemma: whether it will be able to extinguish the tinderbox conflicts or allow regional centres of power to engage in military rivalries designed to promote their geopolitical interests and indulge their outsize ambitions. In this sense, the outcome of the civil war in Syria will have implications that go far beyond the regional framework. Moscow is confident that whatever solution is found in that country may later become a model for the world community to respond to internal conflicts in developing states.

When the nationalist wave was at its crest, Egypt was called the ‘head of Arabism’ and Syria – its ‘heart’. This smacks of historical determinism, although much has changed since that time. The concept of Arabism no longer has the same ring to it: Egypt is no longer the leader, new centres of financial and political influence have emerged in the Gulf, and non-Arab regional players such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel are now ascendant. The altered alignment of forces at the regional level has turned Syria into an arena where the Sunni Saudi Arabia and the Shiite Iran, the two religious centres and leaders of the two main Islamic denominations, are locked in an indirect battle in a new historical setting.² Religious sentiment is also behind the effort to build a medieval Arab caliphate, a new phenomenon in international terrorism that turned the conflict into a multidimensional affair. A full-scale civil war in the centre of the Arab world with its closely intertwined interests – both clashing and to some extent overlapping – has complicated the search for mutually acceptable agreements and made coalition ties fluid and ambiguous. In the final analysis, all of this has predetermined the duration, bloodiness, and brutality of the struggle.

Unlike other hotbeds of conflict in Asia and Africa, in Syria the military contingents and bases of six foreign states – Russia, Iran, Turkey, the US, France, and the UK – and their political gravitational fields are deployed in close proximity. But it is only Russia and Iran that have international legal grounds (an invitation from the Syrian government) for being there. Syrian airspace has been divided as well. This incredibly compact foreign military presence, including non-government paramilitary units (proxies), not only involves unpredictable risks but also equips each of the players on the ground with military and political tools that make it possible to disrupt any final outcome it finds unacceptable. The Syrian crisis is also a mirror reflecting the growing influence of regional actors, each playing a game of its own within the wider context, whose local agendas increasingly often clash with the global interests of the major powers.

¹ ‘Zasedanie Mezhdunarodnogo Diskussionnogo Kluba «Valdai»’ [Valdai Discussion Club’s Annual Meeting], 2014, October 24. Available from: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>

² ‘The Iranian–Saudi Hegemonic Rivalry’, 2017, Belfer Center, October 25. Available from: <http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iranian-saudi-hegemonic-rivalry>

There is yet another reason why the Syrian crisis is so idiosyncratic and difficult to settle. The multilateral talks on the future system of government in Syria have been held against the background of continued military operations punctured by short-lived ceasefire agreements and moves to organize de-escalation zones. In the international context, institutional reforms normally follow the military phase. In Syria, internationally mediated agreements on reforms between the direct participants in the conflict should in effect become the condition for ending the hostilities and focusing joint efforts on combating the persisting terrorist threat.

Seen against the background of the revolutionary challenges arising from modern world development, the bloody Syrian conflict is yet another reminder that the failure to realize the importance of implementing long overdue political reforms and miscalculations in tactical planning for the period after the initial surge of anti-regime sentiment may lead to dire consequences for the state and society.

The Bashar al-Assad regime believed that following its economic reforms, Syria, unlike the ostensibly pro-Western Tunisia and Egypt, had a special immunity as a ‘bastion of anti-Americanism’ in the Middle East. This was clear from the Syrian president’s interview with *The Wall Street Journal* (January 31, 2011), in which he said that despite all the problems, Syria will remain stable and that time is not yet ripe for rapid change.¹ Knowing how sceptical the father of the current Syrian president, Hafez al-Assad, was about Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms and their consequences, as well as the unsuccessful attempt to democratize Algeria,² we can assume that these considerations partly explain Bashar al-Assad’s vacillation and inconsistency long before the outbreak of mass protests, as well as his belated move to adopt a number of important political decisions.

Incidentally, Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s offers the opposite example. Rushing through a programme of democratic reforms in a divided society can also lead to civil strife. In Algeria, it lasted for ten years (1991–2000) and may recur.

The Current State of Play on the Military Map

The eight-year Syrian crisis can be divided into roughly two stages: (1) before Russia’s decisive military intervention in September 2015, and (2) after the Russian Aerospace Forces launched operations in Syria, enabling Damascus to restore control over the majority of Syrian territory and to destroy the military infrastructure of ISIS and other terrorist groups.

¹ Wieland, C, 2012, ‘Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances. Repressions and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring’, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, Cune Press, Seattle, p. 29.

² As the Soviet charge d’affaires ad interim in Syria, the author had meetings with him during that period, subsequently serving as Ambassador of the USSR and later the Russian Federation to Algeria.

The sporadic anti-government protests in late February and early March 2011 were initially peaceful in nature. At first, the opposition's slogans did not go beyond political demands for greater rights and freedoms. They were urging the government to continue ongoing reforms and to make good on the promised reforms. The protests reached critical mass and began sweeping the country after the Syrian leadership abruptly gave in to the omnipotent securicrats who urged the president to stop making concessions and put down the uprising by force. In April and May, heavy weapons were used against peaceful protesters. Legislative measures to partially liberalize the political regime, calls to start a national dialogue, and even the approval of a new constitution in February 2012 were already unable to diffuse the tensions. The conflict was rapidly becoming militarized.

The Syrian opposition, as represented by political emigres and underground civil society organizations with motley ideological beliefs (ranging from liberals to Trotskyites to radical Islamists), was not in itself a threat to the regime, which relied on a well-oiled mechanism of harsh authoritarian power. The rapid (in fact, instantaneous) transition to the military phase was caused by the overwhelming synergy between the explosion of spontaneous protests aided by the wide use of modern communications technologies, the authorities' disproportionate military response, and desertions from the army in combination with the mass infiltration of militants and arms across the borders of neighbouring countries, which was directly supported by Turkey with financial backing from Arab Gulf monarchies, primarily Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Moreover, leaders in Syria's regional environs had 'old scores' to settle with al-Assad: relations with the Syrian president in the run-up to the crisis varied from close cooperation to mutual recrimination. Religious factors were initially of minor importance, but as hostilities expanded and new players got involved, all sides began using religion as a means of mobilization.

The US and leading EU countries immediately declared the al-Assad regime illegitimate, recognised the opposition's political wing as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, and pressured Damascus via the UN and other international organizations. The League of Arab States (LAS) took the unprecedented step of suspending Syria's membership. At that moment, regime change along the lines of Libya was a unifying principle for the anti-Assad coalition that emerged in the region. But as time went on, the clash of interests between the US and its regional partners as well as among the major regional players (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar) reconfigured coalition ties and opened up new dimensions in the Syrian crisis.

But with the help of hindsight, it is even more clear that the initial knee-jerk reaction was a major political blunder, as leading Western experts now recognise. The United States failed to establish a firm base of military-political support in the Arab armed opposition – 'weapons kept falling into the wrong hands'. Neither did it manage to differentiate 'moderate Islamists' from the rapidly proliferating terrorist organizations. But the insistent demands that al-Assad must go only fed the opposition's illusions that they could win a military victory and fuelled

the competition for political influence and control over arms flows and outside funding within their ranks. America's unconditional support for the opposition movement, where jihadists with links to ISIS and Al-Qaeda were rapidly gaining strength, predetermined the weakness of the US diplomatic efforts and constrained the room for manoeuvre. This made Washington hostage to *émigré* politicians with their exorbitant demands and to their regional sponsors. It reached the point that US policy was all too clearly playing into the hands of terrorists, notwithstanding the self-declared US war on terror. This became particularly clear in the summer of 2014, when ISIS achieved spectacular military successes in Iraq and Syria, putting the Barack Obama administration in an even more awkward position.

Between 2012 and 2015, Damascus was burning through internal resources to neutralize military pressure at home. The armed opposition was expanding its zones of territorial control not only in northern and eastern Syria, where radical Islamists spilled over from Iraq, but also in the country's densely populated central areas. The Syrian army was not ready for urban warfare and gradually found itself on the defensive, focusing on guarding distant approaches to the capital, strategic centres, and transport infrastructure.

The Lebanese Hezbollah joined the hostilities in 2012 while Iran was expanding direct military aid to Syria, including by enlisting Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. This made it possible to halt enemy advances towards vital centres for some time but also aggravated relations between different ethnic and religious communities, making the conflict particularly fierce on both sides. Having established close relations with Syria back in the mid-1980s, Iran managed to gain a firm foothold in Iraq and Lebanon during the years of regional upheaval and create extensive military infrastructure under its control. The Iranians regard Syrian territory as a key component of their national security strategy, which is focused on pushing back against Saudi Arabia and its claims to leadership in the Islamic world. Since the Donald Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and ratcheted up economic and political pressure against Tehran, Iran's regional strategy has been put to the test like never before. Signs of internal disaffection¹ are surfacing more and more often in response to the dramatic financial constraints, growing economic hardship, and loss of life in the Syrian war. Questions are being asked about limits of Iran's regional security and Syria's place therein as a crucial component of its broader strategy in relations with the US and Saudi Arabia.

Turkey, which opted for rapid regime change in Damascus and empowering Islamist organizations with ideological proximity to Recep Erdogan's ruling party, has modified its position substantially in the course of the conflict. This change of emphasis in regional policy was brought about by complications in the transition

¹ 'Iranians respond to the regime: 'Leave Syria alone!''', 2018, Al Jazeera, May 2. Available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/iranians-respond-regime-leave-syria-180501081025309.html>

from a parliamentary republic to a strong presidential regime as well as by disappointment with US and EU policy in Syria, on the one hand, and an understanding of the advantages of working with Russia on Syria as part of a broader bilateral co-operation framework, on the other.

The changing regional picture was largely the result of the Kurdish factor, which always played and continues playing a significant role in the domestic politics of the countries forming the so-called Kurdish Triangle (Syria, Turkey, and Iraq). Soon after the start of hostilities, the Syrian government decided to phase out its military presence in north-eastern areas, where the Kurdish majority immediately established control. Erdogan's war on two fronts – one with the al-Assad regime and the other with the armed Kurdish groups – failed to yield success and even led to a spate of ISIS terrorist attacks inside Turkey itself. Frictions intensified with the Americans, who had thrown in their lot with the Kurds after the latter had proved highly effective at waging anti-terrorist operations against ISIS. This created a situation where the Syrian Kurds, who got a unique opportunity to merge their enclaves in Afrin and Kobani, thought that this historic juncture was favourable for organizing an autonomous area on the northern border with Turkey (a Western Kurdistan of sorts) with a claim to independence. After Turkey broke off a ceasefire agreement with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and banned the Kurdish opposition's legal activities at home, it came to regard the Kurdish self-defence units and their political wing, the National Union Party in Syria, as a terrorist organization on a par with ISIS.

The official rationale for the Turkish armed forces and the Free Syrian Army to launch joint operations in northern Syria was that military intervention would clear the border territory east of the Euphrates of Kurdish forces, create a 'buffer security zone' in Syria, and prepare the ground for the return of refugees. By maintaining its partnership with Turkey within the framework of the Astana format, Russia has shown understanding of Turkish concerns based on the Turkish leaders' assurances that they are committed to the territorial integrity of Syria as the end goal of the political process.

Saudi Arabia's role in the Syrian conflict has undergone significant change as well. The tempestuous developments in the region and the expansion of Iranian influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain have convinced Riyadh that Iran is planning to encircle the Islamic holy places with the 'Shia Crescent' and destabilize the Saudi monarchy. Since the start of the conflict, the Saudis have focused on creating a counterweight to Iran in Syria by consolidating ideologically aligned local Islamist forces. By means of funding this part of the armed opposition and imposing Saudi influence over structuring its political wing, Riyadh has played a role in escalating the fighting against government forces.

Once the conflict reached its turning point, the balance of gains and losses was not in favour of the military-political groups backed by Saudi Arabia. The policy to undermine the legitimate regime in Syria from within was in open conflict with the protracted military intervention in Yemen, allegedly undertaken in order to restore the same 'con-

stitutional legitimacy'. The two-front war was becoming increasingly onerous. With ISIS firmly entrenched in Syria and Iraq, terrorist forces in the southern Arabian Peninsula and in Saudi Arabia itself had a free hand to expand their activities. Hopes for the speedy downfall of the al-Assad regime gave way to a more realistic view, something that took place against the background of deteriorating relations with the US. Despite the anti-Iran sentiment they shared, Saudi Arabia was increasingly displeased with the Trump administration's chaotic and unpredictable policy in the Middle East. There were apprehensions that the US was preparing to withdraw from the region. The Saudis were no longer sure that they would have the support they needed at the critical moment, if Iran decided to take advantage of the US pull-out and fill the vacuum.

In parallel, Saudi Arabia was promoting relations with Russia, in spite of their differences over Syria, on the basis of broader joint interests in regional and global politics. Regular contacts, including top-level contacts, were working to achieve mutual understanding on fundamental approaches to a Syrian settlement, including the eradication of the terrorist threat, a speedy start to the Constitutional Committee's operations, and assistance to expand humanitarian aid supplies and the return of refugees.

Russia, as acknowledged by all its opponents, has fundamentally altered the trajectory of the Syrian crisis. By the start of its military campaign in Syria, government forces and various loyal militias were fighting on the outskirts of Damascus and had difficulty containing the enemy's advance on the southern front. That a 'Green Islamist International' would come to power in the heart of the Arab world seemed like a foregone conclusion. It was at that moment, in summer 2015, that President Assad famously said that it was necessary to 'preserve a useful Syria', meaning the Alawite Corridor in the west from Daraa along the seacoast to Latakia in the north, that is, about 30–35 per cent of Syrian territory.

Since then, a totally different military reality has taken shape. Damascus has regained control over most of its territory (according to various estimates, between 68 and 70 per cent), while the armed opposition is no longer able to conduct active military operations and retains only some of its enclaves in north-western Syria. The 'Arab Caliphate' as a quasi-state terrorist entity has been wiped out along with its military infrastructure. At the same time, numerous obstacles, foreseen and unforeseen, will have to be overcome on the path to a post-conflict settlement. Approximately one-third of Syrian territory is controlled by Turkey (the northern enclave stretching from Hatay Province in Turkey to the western bank of the Euphrates) and the Syrian Democratic Forces that were specially trained and equipped by the US (northern and north-eastern areas along the Euphrates). Finally, there is still the problem of Idlib in the west, where the de-escalation zone covers parts of the Aleppo

and Hama provinces. This territory is dominated by jihadist radical Islamists, who have rallied around the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham terrorist organization.¹

Between Geneva and Astana: Peripatetic International Mediation

Three UN Secretary General's Special Envoys for Syria have come and gone during the eight years of the conflict, which was internationalized from the start by the Arab states themselves. There were numerous attempts to find a way forward to a settlement through the joint efforts of the international community, none of which led to the desired result, although, it must be admitted, they made an important contribution to the global practice of conflict settlement and yielded considerable knowledge for the purposes of objectively analysing the causes of failure. International debates have focused on the mediating role of the United Nations putting forward a number of important questions: whether its special envoy can remain impartial, no matter how skilful he is as a negotiator, if the UN Security Council members, to whom he reports, support different sides to the conflict, for which reason he is constantly blamed for being partial by this or that side; whether the success of a mediatory mission depends on the mediator's mandate; and finally, whether a 'firm mandate' of the kind that was conferred on the EU High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina can be more effective in maintaining the needed pressure on the warring sides.

The LAS launched a mediatory mission during the first few months of armed clashes, but its efforts proved unsuccessful and were quickly discontinued. The regime and the opposition were hoping to gain an early victory with outside support. Besides the Syrian leaders had every reason to distrust the LAS, which was under the influence of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In February 2012, the UN stepped in as an international mediator and continues acting in that role. After the UN Security Council proved incapable of devising coordinated solutions (the West jointly with the Gulf Arab states were pushing for international legitimation of intervention, but all their proposals were resolutely vetoed by Russia and China), the UN General Assembly asked the then Secretary General to appoint his special envoy for Syria. He chose former Secretary General Kofi Annan, who had considerable peace-making experience.

A six-point plan devised by the international mediator envisaged an end to military operations, the deployment of a UN observer mission, and a transition to inter-

¹ An alliance of Islamist groupings led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly – Al-Nusra Front), banned in Russia.

nationally assisted intra-Syrian talks.¹ But this simple and, in theory, correct plan failed to get the Security Council's support and was eventually foiled by the Syrian parties themselves. The UN observers were unable to continue their mission amid unending hostilities, provocations from different sides, and artificial constraints on their movements imposed by the Syrian authorities. In June 2012, Kofi Annan resigned after less than six months on the job.

At the same time, the Annan mission prepared the ground for the first consensus-based international document – the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012 – which later served as the basis for the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) that established the legal framework for the Syrian settlement process. Russia–US interaction played the leading role in this sense, despite the differences between the two in the Action Group for Syria. At that time, Russia and the United States managed to reach agreement on the main principles of international support for Syrian efforts to emerge from the crisis. These documents formed the foundation of the mandate issued to the Secretary General's subsequent Special Envoys for Syria, former Algerian Foreign Minister Lakhdar Brahimi and Staffan de Mistura, who had previously headed UN missions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

From the start of UN mediation, the political process ran into problems. The earlier approved international legal documents contained guiding principles for the settlement and a roadmap with timeframes for each of its stages (establishment of a transitional body with executive powers, drafting of a new constitution, and free elections under international supervision). The most important of the factors that ultimately predetermined the negotiating stalemate in Geneva were the following:

- *In the documents on the Syrian settlement process, the UN Security Council was identified as the main and sole implementation mechanism and tool for supporting the Special Envoy. In case of a split in its ranks, the political capital of international mediation would be devalued.*
- *The Russia–US divide was growing in interpreting the provisions of the Geneva Communiqué and the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 related to the meaning of the transitional period and the sequence of steps. Most of the clashes were over the status and powers of the 'transitional governing body' and President Assad's role and position during that period. Until recently, both the US and the opposition urged his resignation as a precondition for direct intra-Syrian talks. There were no feasible grounds for this farfetched interpretation in the foundational documents.*
- *There was no support from the Syrian parties whose calculations were based on the assumption of military victory. In September 2016, Russian-American interaction was discontinued, which made it more difficult for the international mediator to compel the Syrians to start negotiations. Intervals between rounds*

¹ 'Letter of UN Secretary General BAN Ki-Moon to Ms. Susan Rise, President of the Security Council', 2012, New York, April 18, p. 1.

of talks grew lengthier, the escalation of violence continued, and political issues were overshadowed by snowballing humanitarian problems.

- *Protracted debates continued on what should come first – the fight against terrorism or agreements on the parameters of the transitional period, that is, the division of power.*
- *Divides within the political opposition unfolded, there was persistent internal friction and reshuffling as opposition groups vied for leadership, and inability to enlist the support of field commanders, whose divisions reflected the rivalry between Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, was obvious.*
- *A sufficiently strong pressure on the Syrian parties was required. While the Syrian army was having success on the battlefield following Russian intervention and the opposition was increasingly inclined to scale back their inflated demands to more moderate ones, Damascus displayed less and less willingness to make concessions and even veered towards tougher political positions.*
- *The intra-Syrian and international negotiating venues became increasingly fragmented, which reduced the importance of the Geneva format.*

It must be noted that the two major diplomats of international stature armed with an international mandate failed to achieve an effective cessation of hostilities, ensure the unimpeded delivery of humanitarian aid, or bring together the Syrian government and the opposition for direct talks, although they did conduct intensive negotiations in different formats and with various combinations of participants. At the same time, it was largely due to their efforts that the sluggish political process in Geneva was kept going and gradually revealed its weaknesses. In early 2017, it became clear that the military situation had to be stabilized, if the sides were to emerge from the protracted political stalemate. Russia focused on cooperation with Turkey, which had by that time expanded its influence over different organizations of Syrian militants and had shown willingness to cooperate with Russia in Syria. The two were later joined by Iran, which also had a stake in de-escalating the military standoff, and thus the Astana negotiating mechanism, or the Astana format, took shape (Astana, now Nur-Sultan, is the capital of Kazakhstan, where the first meetings were held).

This format, in which Staffan de Mistura was involved, had peculiarities and advantages of its own. It was for the first time that Syrian government representatives sat down to the negotiating table with commanders of armed opposition units, whom Damascus had labelled terrorists. Acting in coordination and on parallel tracks, Russia, Turkey, and Iran provided guarantees that the agreements reached by the sides would be implemented. Turkey was, as it were, responsible for the ‘cooperative behaviour’ of the groups under its influence, while Russia sought to obtain the same response from Damascus. Iran in this complicated setting was supposed to restrain the uncontrolled actions by Hezbollah and Shiite militias. An important result of the regular Astana meetings was the agreements on the four de-escalation zones, which for the time be-

ing made it possible to reduce the severity of military operations and step up efforts to achieve local ceasefires. The opposition attached much importance to confidence-building measures (release of prisoners, prisoner exchanges, etc.), lifting the blockade from a number of populated localities, and delivering humanitarian aid to areas in distress.

The agenda of the intra-Syrian talks in Astana was expanding, eliciting a negative response from the US and the leading EU countries, which claimed that the Astana format was encroaching on the political field that the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 had set aside for the Geneva process and the mediation of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy. The relationship between these two formats plagued contacts with Western partners for a long time, the latter expressing distrust of Moscow's peace-making efforts and suspecting it of attempting to 'circumvent' some key provisions of the UN documents and devalue the UN role in the context of the Syrian settlement process. In response, Russia repeatedly explained that the Astana talks and the Russian-Turkish-Iranian summits were aimed at finding compromises and helping the Geneva process and that there was no alternative to settling the Syrian crisis on the basis of international law.

At the same time, the new military realities and changes in the alignment of forces between the regime and the opposition called for certain adjustments to the order and sequence of actions to implement the key provisions of the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. While cooperating with the UN Special Envoy, the Syrian government refused to discuss the essentials of establishing, to quote the Geneva Communiqué, 'a transitional governing body' capable of exercising 'full executive powers'. Instead, they suggested various options for a broad-based dialogue in Damascus to form a national unity government, all of which were absolutely unacceptable to the opposition.

This gave rise to the idea to start a substantive intra-Syrian dialogue by discussing a draft new constitution, whose adoption figures as one of the central points on the roadmap of the political process. Since late 2017, the Special Envoy has focused on forming a Constitutional Committee. This effort was assisted by Russia, Turkey, and Iran that were holding regular trilateral summits. The Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi (January 2018) made an important contribution to this effort by adopting a key decision to start drafting a new constitution under UN auspices.

Staffan de Mistura's efforts in this regard, which continued until his resignation in December 2018, showed clearly the full extent of the distrust between all sides with political influence. It became obvious that finding points of overlap between the interests was a tall order. Russia, for its part, sought to create a broad field of accord on a 'balanced and inclusive basis' around the 'third list' candidates representing civil society and independent experts (Committee members from the government and the opposition were finally introduced). But Western

partners were jealous of Russia's leading role in these efforts. At the same time, steps to finalize the Constitutional Committee's composition were complicated by the position of Damascus that regarded the constitutional process as a 'purely sovereign affair' of the Syrian people without any foreign interference, thereby effectively disavowing the UN track.

Simultaneously, a situation that was generally favourable for a gradual transition from the military phase to a political process emerged by early 2019. A rough consensus was emerging that the Geneva-2 negotiating paradigm based on the 'regime platform' vs the 'opposition platform' had outlived its usefulness in the new situation and that there was little promise of any further progress on this path.¹ The new military realities are recognised by the US and Russia's European partners, which are no longer insisting on regime change. Instead, they are emphasizing the need for constitutional reform as soon as possible, to be followed by free elections under UN auspices in conformity with the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The main question is how to reduce all components of the political process to their common denominator and whether this is possible in principle against the background of the growing conflict between Russia and the West.

Main Components of the Syrian Settlement Process

The basic elements, without which Syria's return to peace and national reconciliation appears impossible, include constitutional and government reform, economic reconstruction, urgent humanitarian aid needed by nearly a half of the population, the return of refugees, a reorganization of the army and security services, UN-supervised elections, and much more. Merging all these elements in a stabilization package is an important, albeit difficult, task requiring multilateral diplomatic efforts, provided a minimal level of mutual understanding between nations can be achieved.

Post-war Syria's government and political system and its constitutional legitimization are among the key issues at the centre of the clash of external interests and internal divisions in Syria. A timetable and procedure for drafting a new constitution is a central requirement for the transition to 'inclusive and non-sectarian governance', as contained in the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. For all the discrepancies related to the sequence of steps in the transitional period, the international community is evolving a more or less common understand-

¹ 'Centralization and Decentralization in Syria: Concepts and Practices', 2018, Fourth Annual Book, Omran Center for Strategic Studies, November 15, p. 13.

ing that the starting point should be the launch of a Syrian-led constitutional process, as envisaged by the resolution.

Syrian lawyers and political scientists are advocating two approaches: (1) approving a new constitution, or (2) amending the 2012 law now in effect. Damascus is calling into question the very need for a new constitution in a belief that it is able to deal with all these issues on its own without making substantial concessions. The Syrian opposition, which is riven by divisions on many other issues as well, was basically in favour of a new constitution. But many of its realistically minded members have lately agreed to take as a basis the 2012 constitution, provided there are substantial amendments to it.¹ In effect, these concern transitioning from a strictly presidential to presidential-parliamentary form of governance. The administrative system should be decentralized but the state should retain its unitary nature, and the constitution will contain the necessary guarantees of the country's territorial integrity. Any type of a federation is regarded as aimed at a partition of Syria and resolutely rejected by both the regime and the majority of the opposition. This is the little they have in common.

According to the opposition, the 2012 constitution, approved as it was in a referendum amid a mounting civil conflict, cannot be seen as a product of national consensus. The Constitutional Commission was directly established by a presidential executive order, which means it was appointed. The draft constitution was not publicly discussed, though this was hardly possible in practice amid increasingly large-scale armed clashes. The main grievances came down to the absence of an unequivocal separation of powers provision in the constitution and a demand for limits on presidential powers (in this regard the constitution was only slightly amended), expanded rights of the local authorities and ethnic minorities in the direction of decentralization, and a reliably independent judiciary.²

The effort to form a Constitutional Committee has ran into serious problems and showed that the drafting of amendments to the current constitution will take a long time. The sticking point is the territorial administrative issue that hinges on the Kurdish factor.

During the war, the Kurds, with support from the US that backed them in the fight against ISIS, managed to create a strong military organization and a system of local governance beyond the reach of Damascus in northern and eastern Syria. The uncertainty regarding the continued US military presence in Syria and the unpredictability of their US ally forced the Kurds to choose between confronting a military threat from Turkey and coming to terms with Damascus. The Kurdish leaders are seeking to retain the *de facto* autonomous status of their cantons, and to prevent the disbandment

¹ 'Constitutional Options for Syria', 2017, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) Programme. Available from: <http://nafsprogramme.info/library/constitutional-options-syria.html>

² Al Bunni, A, 'A Critical Reading of the New Syrian Constitution' (in Arabic).

of Syrian Democratic Forces units that could assume responsibility for security east of the Euphrates.

The Syrian government's position on giving the Kurds a special administrative status remains essentially unchanged. According to a statement by Minister of State for National Reconciliation Affairs Ali Haidar, no Syrian province can enjoy preferences that would 'differentiate it from other provinces or ethnicities'.¹ Relevant talks are still in progress on various decentralization formats including decentralization at the level of local communities or the establishment of some asymmetrical territorial administrative system. Law No. 107 on local governments, which is now in effect and acceptable to the opposition, might become a workable basis for discussing the entire gamut of these issues.

Economic revival is another vital aspect of the Syrian settlement process. Of all the conflicts in the region, Syria has suffered the greatest losses in terms of material destruction, casualties, and decline in the quality of human capital. During the war, its GDP has contracted by more than 50 per cent, whereas it should have grown by 40 per cent under the pre-war economic plan. The budget deficit has increased by more than 1,500 per cent. The UN estimates the total damage caused by the hostilities at \$250bn, whereas the Syrian government has suggested that about \$400bn is needed for rebuilding infrastructure alone. According to expert calculations, humanitarian aid requirements are also adding up to the impressive sum of \$20bn. More than 70 per cent of families are suffering from malnutrition, 80 per cent of Syrians have fallen below the poverty line, while life expectancy has been reduced by 20 years.

Under these circumstances, Syria is unable to recover without outside aid. Financial losses and destruction have reached a scale that makes economic reconstruction an insurmountable problem for Syria, or for any other state or even group of states. Conscious of the importance of the economic and humanitarian components of the settlement, Russia has proposed that the US, the EU, and other potential donors pool efforts to mobilize resources for economic recovery and the return of refugees.

But a coordinated international policy, even at the UN level, is still lacking, despite the realization that the material damage caused to Syria and its humanitarian plight are unprecedented since the end of the Second World War. The US and EU countries are refusing to finance reconstruction of government-controlled areas in Syria (or more than 70 per cent of the most densely populated territory with its infrastructure almost entirely in tatters). Their condition for giving aid is that Syria be transformed as part of a 'credible' political process. What is primarily meant is the drafting and approval of a new Syrian constitution to be followed by UN-supervised 'free and fair' elections.

¹ 'Syria's Kurdish-Led Northeast to be Treated Like Rest of Country: Syrian Minister', 2018, Reuters, September 4. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/syrias-kurdish-led-northeast-to-be-treated-like-rest-of-country-syrian-minister-idUSKCN1LK2FN>

The West hopes to use these political terms as a tool to pressure Damascus and its allies. Apart from political considerations, the refusal to cooperate directly with the Syrian government is justified by citing the need to implement administrative reforms and modify property and investment laws. Western experts believe that directing international economic aid through official channels to the country's militarized economy would inevitably strengthen corrupt businesses and local militias in cahoots with the regime.¹ Still worse, the Syrian leaders, for their part, are also politicizing economic reconstruction issues by declaring that they are not prepared to receive aid from 'accomplices of terrorism'. Their hope is that a number of EU countries might change their approaches if Damascus displays sufficient firmness. This can be seen in President Assad's statements to the effect that 'the Syrians are able to restore the country on their own' and that 'they will not need the West's aid for that'.² The European countries have indeed split into resolute opponents of cooperation with a 'regime that is unamenable to reform' and a conciliatory group that hopes for rapid stabilization or their companies' participation in lucrative projects.³

It is clear today that developing a coordinated economic rehabilitation project for Syria is a mission for the entire international community, given that the conflict's grave political and humanitarian aftermath has extended far beyond the Middle East region. Common cause could be found in this regard, which would make it possible to merge multilateral efforts on the political track into a single stabilization package.

The refugee problem is inseparably linked with Syria's reconstruction. Syrian refugees make up no less than one-third of the world's displaced persons. According to UN statistics, nearly a half of Syria's pre-war population has been forced to leave their places of residence (5.6 million refugees and 6.6 million internally displaced persons). The biggest number of refugees (3.5 million) have fled to Turkey. There are also 1 million refugees in Lebanon and 650,000 in Jordan.⁴ This problem is dragging down neighbouring economies and creating serious political and social challenges. In Lebanon, where Syrians are 20 per cent of the population, the refugees have become, to quote Prime Minister Saad

¹ Heydeman, S, 2017, 'Rules for Reconstruction in Syria', Brookings, August 24. Available from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/08/24/rules-for-reconstruction-in-syria/>

² 'Asad Otkazalsia ot Pomoshchi Zapada v Vosstanovlenii Sirii' [Assad Refuses Western Assistance in Syrian Reconstruction], 2018, RBC, June 24. Available from: https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/06/2018/5b2f7e079a7947893e238e9d?from=main_right

³ Asseburg, M & Oweis, KY, 2017, 'Syria's Reconstruction Scramble', German Institute For International and Security Affairs, December. Available from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/syrias-reconstruction-scramble/>

⁴ 'Syria Emergency', The UN Refugee Agency. Available from: <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>

Hariri, a ‘time bomb’. Real GDP growth rates have been slowing in Jordan over the last three years and per capita income has not budged since 2012.¹

The Syrian government should have a stake in creating a favourable civic environment for a number of obvious reasons, including the need to restore trust, engage the average business owner, normalize relations with the West, and, last but not least, hold elections (the presidential elections are scheduled for 2021) that would be recognised as legitimate. Russia’s appeals and initiatives were instrumental in inducing refugees to return, starting in mid-2018, mainly from Lebanon and Jordan, as well as from Turkey to areas not controlled by the Syrian government. But there are a number of circumstances obstructing a full-scale return of refugees, most importantly the position of the US and the EU, which are of the opinion that the internal conditions for a voluntary and safe return are yet to be created. The same view is held by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). In their contacts with the Syrian government, its representatives insist on gaining a wider presence in Syria to help refugees on the ground and enhance trust.² To be objective, the difficult military and political situation and the persisting uncertainty concerning prospects of the political process are insufficient for the early return of refugees, which will only become less likely over time, as demonstrated, for example, by the experience in Bosnia. According to a Carnegie Foundation study, despite the fact that the majority of refugees are willing to return home, it is unlikely that they will be able to do so in the short term, even if military operations come to an end.³

To create an internal environment incentivizing the beginning of a large-scale repatriation process, a number of preconditions have to be met, as demonstrated by international practice in other conflict zones. These include security, legal guarantees of property rights, the possibility to return to former residences, amnesty for draft evasion, the availability of jobs and social services, and restoration of the healthcare and education systems. This means that much depends on the Syrian government itself, on whether it is able to cope with these major challenges, and if it has the necessary political will.

In the meantime, opposition representatives inclined to come to terms with the government, as well as Western sources, note how inconsistent and contradictory Damascus has been in its efforts related to this sphere of post-conflict reconstruction. Particularly puzzling was the adoption of Law No.10 of April 2,

¹ Nemeh, B, 2017, ‘Jordan’s Burden’, Carnegie Middle East Center, March 21. Available from: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/68330>

² ‘U.N. Agency Calls for More Access in Syria to Help Refugees Return’, 2019, Reuters, March 9. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-refugees-grandi/u-n-agency-calls-for-more-access-in-syria-to-help-refugees-return-idUSKBN1QQ0JM>

³ Yahya, M, Kassir, J & Hariri, K, 2018, ‘Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home’, Carnegie Middle East Center, April 16. Available from: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/04/16/refugee-attitudes-toward-return-to-syria-pub-76061>

2018,¹ which enables the Syrian government to confiscate real estate and use it for urban redevelopment without paying compensations to owners. Syrian citizens regardless of their actual residence are ordered to submit ownership documentation within 30 days, which is basically unrealistic for refugees. It is widely believed that the government-backed law targets the regime's opponents and is intended to resettle loyalists in new development areas in major cities. Although reassuring explanations were offered later and enforcement of the law was modified, the fact that this law was approved at all did nothing to help restore trust and had negative repercussions.

Implementing other repatriation terms will require real socioeconomic reforms, reorganization of numerous security services and the army, reintegration of combatants into peaceful life, an overhaul of the legal system, and, most importantly, a change in mentality from 'winner takes all' to true national reconciliation in which there are 'no winners, no losers'. These changes will certainly take rather a long time, given the resistance from forces inside the regime that are not interested in radical reform, as well as from radical Islamists who are not ready for compromise.

Thus, the situation as it stands suggests the need for a cohesive approach consisting of three prongs: (1) the constitutional and political process, (2) economic rehabilitation, and (3) return of refugees. At some stage, the first of these three can and must be prioritized.

Post-war Syria's Prospects: Russian Interests

During the war years, Russia, including through its military diplomacy, achieved many of the strategic aims it set for the operation in Syria:

- *curtailed efforts of regime change in Syria;*
- *prevented the coming to power of radical Islamists, the region's subsequent destabilization, and the spillover of militant Islamism to Russian territory;*
- *crushed ISIS as a terrorist territorial entity and its military infrastructure. Although the intention to create a joint antiterrorist coalition proposed by Russia failed, Russia and the US fought against ISIS on parallel tracks, if separately;*
- *restored government control over more than two-thirds of Syrian territory;*
- *consolidated Russia's positions in the Eastern Mediterranean, which has historic significance for the Russian Navy;*
- *confirmed Russia's status as a world power.*

¹ 'Assad's property law hits hope of return for Syrians in Germany', 2018, Reuters, June 14. Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-germany-insight/assads-property-law-hits-hope-of-return-for-syrians-in-germany-idUSKBN1JA1V1>

All this raises the question: what next? What succession of military efforts and diplomatic steps should ensue?

The military-political situation on the ground limits Damascus' opportunities to independently direct the further advances of its armed forces. Apart from military and humanitarian problems, liberating Idlib as well as northern and eastern areas by force is contingent on reaching political understandings and some intricate compromises in a broader format rather than between Russia, Turkey, and Iran alone. At this stage, Russia must deploy artful diplomatic manoeuvring in order to preserve mutual understanding with its Astana partners without alienating Israel. It will be a difficult challenge to address the legitimate security concerns of Iran and Israel and prevent a clash between them.

We must not discount the possibility of establishing working relations on the post-conflict settlement in Syria with the US outside the channels of military communication that, as both sides admit, are functioning successfully. Contrary to Trump's statements, the US is not going to phase out its military presence in Syria. It does not matter in this case whether the force is reduced and, if so, to what extent, because as the Americans have repeatedly showed, their special forces in eastern Syria will remain under the permanent protection of US air power. Keeping a limited contingent in Syria, according to the majority in the US military-political establishment, is seen as a chance to 'waive the flag' at multilateral talks on Syria, while keeping an eye on Iran's military communication lines between Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

A new alignment of forces in the conflict symbolizes a certain ending of its military phase and, as logic suggests, creates prerequisites for progress on the political track. The question is what is to be understood by a political solution? Is it a long-term settlement or a mere pretence of one based on superficial changes? A picture of victory is clearly discernible already. This refers in particular to the triumphant mood in Damascus. Allegedly, a military solution has been achieved despite everyone's claims that a military solution was impossible. This means that the future course of the political process should be determined by the winners. Syria's tactics, as outlined by President Bashar al-Assad, consists in working towards reconciliation, but if proved ineffective, the use of military force to liberate the rest of the country, including from the 'US occupation'.¹

This approach is fraught with numerous dangers. As we know from the history of other civil wars, a full victory achieved by one of the sides does not guarantee that peace will return, if the original problems that caused the conflict remain unresolved and the winners continue to face a hostile external environment.

The West has, in effect, recognised that Russia plays the 'key role'. But it also is erecting obstacles with the goal of getting Moscow to pressure Damascus,

¹ Gazdiev, M, 2018, "‘Libo U Nas Est’ Strana, Libo ee Net”: Asad o Budushchem Sirii i Podderzhke so Storony Rossii” [“Either We Have a Country, Or We Do Not”: Assad on the Future of Syria and Russian Assistance], RT, May 31. Available from: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/518376-intevyu-bashar-asad>

which has always been a much needed, if difficult, partner for Russia. In this way, responsibility for the final result is being put on Damascus and its allies. If the US and Europe manage to find points of contact with Russia to develop a common vision for post-war Syria, they will be ready to work together; if not, then any of the current players will be able to act as spoiler by destabilizing the situation.

It is in Russia's interests to steer the process towards a durable settlement, proceeding from the assumption that the post-war arrangement in Syria cannot be the same as before the war. A new military reality must be consolidated, with the power structure resting on a truly inclusive basis and representing a wide spectrum of national patriotic forces, including the political interests of the Sunni majority. Otherwise, the fruits of military success could be lost over time.

Of considerable importance for reaching a long-term settlement is the effort to restore Syria's relations with both – its immediate neighbours (there have been some positive movement in this regard) and the outside world. It is in Russia's interests to work for a settlement that is the result of international consensus, including the international community's recognition of a reformed Syrian regime's legitimacy and Russia's long-term military presence in Syria. If Russia outlines its strategic interests in Syria in a more open and clear manner and signals its readiness for multilateral compromise, it has ample opportunities and military-political influence to secure its interests by non-confrontational means. After so many sacrifices and humanitarian disasters, the ice of mutual antagonism and hatred can only be thawed by long-term, patient and, most importantly, uninterrupted multilateral efforts in different combinations.

A New Security Architecture for the Middle East?

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The Middle East broke all records for surprise events in 2019. The unexpected changes of government in Algeria and Sudan, mass protests in Lebanon and Iraq, the sensational election outcome in Tunisia, the never-ending election process in Israel, a new escalation of US–Iran tensions, zigzagging developments in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, and many more – the list may be continued. At the same time, this is not the first time it happens. The situation in the region tended to be changeable in the past as well, and surprise and randomness have long become the landmark of the Middle East political process – as may be clearly seen yet again at the beginning of 2020.

This is probably why someone who originally came from the Middle East, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a Lebanese-American risk analyst, essayist, and economist of Antiochian Greek descent, invented the black swan theory. The black swan theory describes events overturning the natural course of development that have three key characteristics: they come as a surprise, have a major effect, and are often rationalized after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. The Arab Spring, armed conflicts and diplomatic crises, revolutions and coups, having stunned the international community at first, were provided with so many explanations later that they came to be seen as perfectly logical and even as the only possible outcome of undercover processes or events that had not been taken into account.

But maybe this is not so, and the suddenness of these events was not the result of faulty political optics but rather a fundamental feature of social development? The baffling interplay of causality and absence of causes, which has long been a feature of the Middle East, has created a surprising combination of changeability and invariability of political reality. There is a constant whirlwind of events, and yet nothing ever seems to change. Surprise developments can transform regional reality overnight despite the sluggish pace of everyday political life. The routine is interrupted by breakthroughs and rapid development, which in turn leads to chaos that becomes a new stability.

This seems to stultify any political forecasting. However, scenarios may acquire a new meaning if we take into account Taleb's theory or the law of unanticipated consequences popularized by sociologist Robert K. Merton, and if we stop trying to calculate the probability of forecasts to the decimal approximation. We can use these scenarios as red flags marking the realm of the probable, while keeping in mind that reality can turn the probability scale upside down.

Tricky Dichotomies, Contradictions, and Other Development Drivers

Considering the ongoing transformation, there are a number of basic and increasingly important dichotomies underpinning the developments that undermine stability and are fraught with unpredictable consequences for the region.

Unitarism vs decentralization is one such dichotomy.

The age-old nature of this binary pair becomes obvious when looking at how the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East evolve, pulling new actors into their orbit. It also explains why this region is so prone to insurmountable conflicts. The permanent nature of this binary opposition serves as a driver for unrelenting struggles among local players, including armed conflicts. External actors seek to benefit from this by imposing their agendas on the conflicting sides and pursuing their own interests, which more often than not have little if anything in common with the interests of these conflicting parties.

Decentralization could seem as a logical and inevitable solution for countries within the region that have been torn apart by conflict, including Syria, Libya, or Yemen. It could also help overcome the latent or quashed conflicts in a number of countries in the Middle East. The list of candidates could be quite long, but it is up to the countries themselves to resolve the problem or place it on its agenda in order to prevent future complications. That being said, Iraq's partial transition to a federal structure did not help stabilize the country. It did, however, stop the Arab-Kurdish conflict, which had lasted for many years. At the same time, the United Arab Emirates use a federal model that has been sustainable and ensured stability and high growth rates.

Developments over the recent months inspire some optimism in terms of overcoming the intense struggle of opposing minority groups in their fight for greater autonomy within their respective states against governments unwilling to accommodate their demands and fearing secessionist aspirations. Compromises achieved by external actors who are working together to stop violence and bring the conflicting parties to the negotiating table have an essential role. In this context, it is worth mentioning the January 2020 agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to promote a ceasefire in Libya, as well as in Syria's Idlib province, although this did not prevent the leaders of the conflicting sides in Libya from backing out of signing a truce in Moscow on January 13, 2020.

This problem is related to a broader issue of ensuring the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, which has a direct bearing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict itself is broader in scope. It has both a pan-Arabic and international (interstate) dimensions. Still, the struggle between Palestinian Arabs and Jews for control over the Palestinian land is at its core. US President Donald Trump's unilateral steps in this conflict clearly do nothing to bring about a solution along the lines traced by UN Security Council resolutions. In addition, these initiatives could make even the prospect of a solution impossible. The Trump peace plan, or the 'deal of the century', announced by Washington January 28, 2020, hardly inspires optimism. The project to establish an unviable state of New Palestine, which is clearly unacceptable for Palestinians, proves that any attempt to carry out this plan would do nothing but escalate tensions.

Secularism vs religiosity is another dichotomy.

The region presents a wide range of state models, from theocratic regimes (Islamic Republic of Iran) to those that enshrined the secular nature of the state in the constitution. While Turkey is the only member of the latter group, it is a paradox that it is in this country that the ruling party, the Justice and Development Party, which has gained the support of majority of the people in a series of democratic elections, is the one that stands for a soft version of Islamism. Iran, with its Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) doctrine of statehood, has nevertheless all the functioning democratic institutions, including the parliament, political parties, electoral system, etc. Lebanon stands apart with its quotas system for the representation of various confessional groups within the government. Here, the Maronite community plays an important role while Shia military and political institutions (e.g. Hezbollah as a sub-state actor) are gaining ground. This heightens tensions within the country, enabling outside forces to benefit from this environment in order to undermine stability. Representatives of the Syrian government insisted on establishing a secular state in Syria following the intra-Syrian talks in Geneva, while the Islam-oriented part of the opposition strongly opposed this.

This already complex and contradictory landscape would not be complete if we left out of the equation radical jihadist groups (banned in Russia), including the tens of thousands of armed fighters who remain in the Idlib province. At the same time, ISIS failed in its attempts to build its own ugly model of statehood.

Speaking of the ambiguity of transformation processes in the region, we cannot fail to mention the far-reaching reforms in Saudi Arabia, promoted by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. However, anywhere you look there is always a segment of society that opposes reforms, and reformers find it challenging at times to override this opposition, even when having the government machine behind them, and Saudi Arabia is not an exception.

Naturally, not all the contradictions that determine the regional landscape can be described in binary opposition terms. There are also a great number of other increasingly urgent challenges that should have been addressed a long time ago. These include imbalances in resources, miscalculations and failures in nation building, lack of an effective social contract, deficit of effective governance institutions, as well as the failure to create a regional security architecture.

Each of these problems is complex and multifaceted. However, identifying them would not be enough for formulating future scenarios. It is essential that the specific nature of the Middle East region with its multitude of actors operating at various levels, from local to global, and from local tribal militias and religious groups to governments, from religious communities to transnational corporations, be taken into account. There is a unique narrative for each of these actors, while they interact with one another outside of any institutional frameworks.

Against this backdrop, a plethora of diverse drivers affect the region's development. Some of them reflect fundamental challenges and trends, while others are momentary or even accidental. Still, in the medium term there is a balance between the fundamental and incidental factors. All these factors can be divided into four main groups.

The first group consists of fundamental factors relating to lasting historical processes and mostly dealing with socioeconomic and environmental concerns on both regional and global scale, including resources, demographic and gender imbalances, water and food scarcity, etc. These factors have always affected regional development in one way or another, but over the past years they gained a political dimension, affecting the regional and national development agendas. For instance, various political forces have often exploited the water deficit problem, which lies in the basis of a number of conflicts. While the Arab Spring uprising may have been caused at the outset by demographic imbalances or natural disasters, other fundamental factors came to the fore as these processes unfolded, including gender inequality and a considerable deterioration of the quality of life. In fact, more and more people in the Middle East are no longer willing to tolerate inequalities of this kind. Environmental deterioration has become another vital factor. These challenges were among the key drivers of the 2019 protests.

The second group covers ideological and political factors. On the one hand, these include the lack and deficiency of institutions in terms of enabling national political systems to overcome the existing and emerging challenges and threats, as well as the readiness to launch and continue urgent reforms, and promote post-conflict recovery of governance institutions. On the other hand, this group also includes factors of a purely ideological nature. It was a common belief several years ago that ideology no longer mattered in today's world. Yet, the developments in the Middle East over the past years have proved otherwise. Ideology is back. In the 2010s, public opinion across the region focused primarily on matters of ideology, making cultural and civilizational choices, and setting national development strategies. This is what the standoff between the Islamists and secular forces in 2011–2013 was all about, and the same applies to the religious and sectarian struggles that followed, in addition to attempts of national re-consolidation in a number of states over the past two years. The same questions were central to shaping the new regional balances.

The third group consists of international, military, and political factors related to conflicts, as well as foreign policy strategies adopted by regional and global actors.

Finally, the fourth group of factors includes the so-called existential spoilers, i.e. anti-system forces and political leaders who came into the spotlight at the time of turbulence and weak institutions.

Considering the challenging nature of the dichotomies, the complexity of contradictions, the specific regional landscape, and the diversity of development drivers, a wide range of development scenarios can be imagined for the region, while always keeping in mind that a black swan event can happen any moment.

Scenarios for Subregions

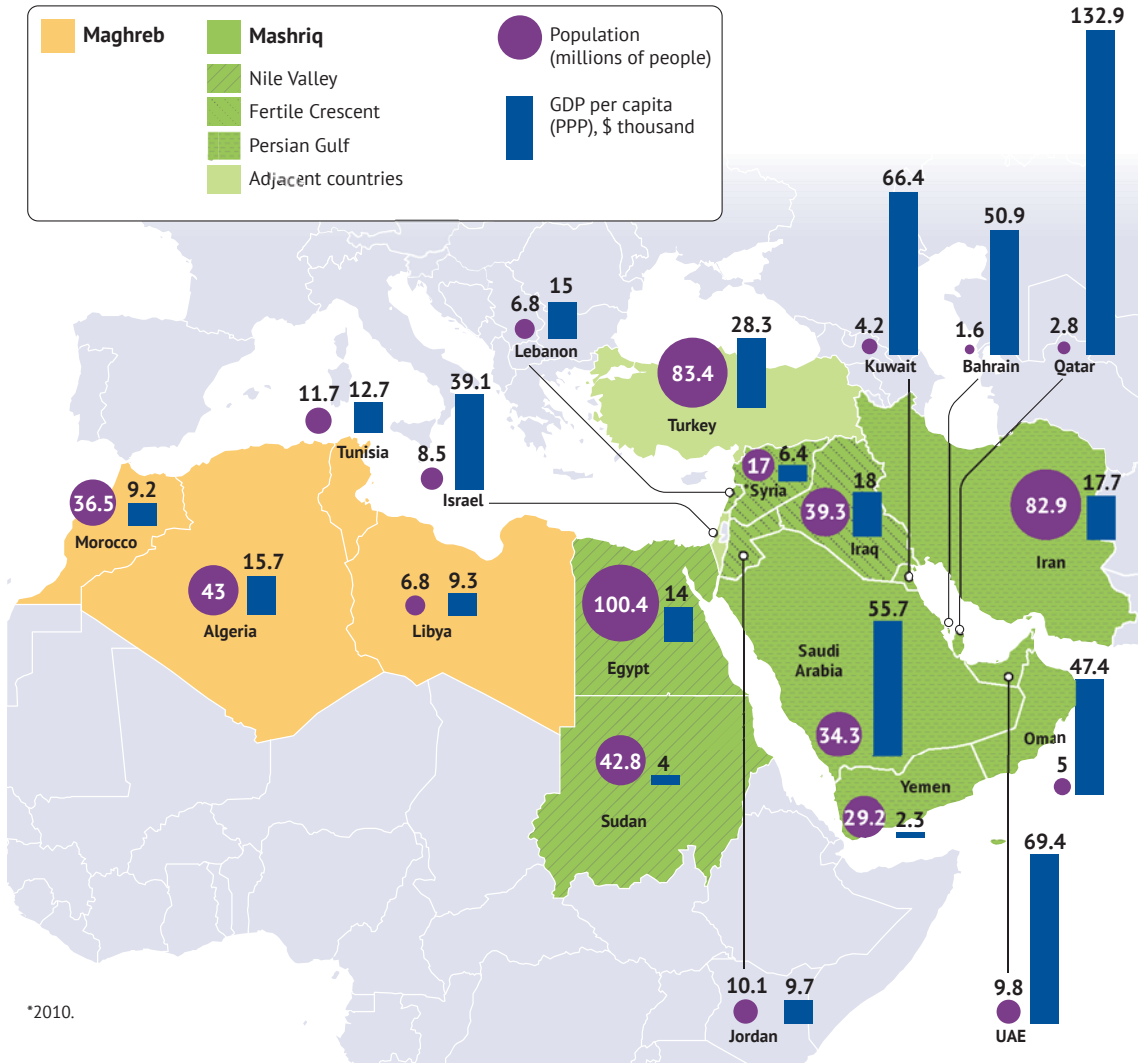
The analysis of these scenarios should proceed from the bottom up (from national, international, and subregional to regional level), because the majority of regional development factors have to do with the basic problems of individual societies and states rather than the global agenda. Consequently, developments in individual countries will determine the developments in the subregions and subsequently in the whole of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

MENA, which developed into an integral political region in the 20th century, is divided historically into the Maghreb (Northwest Africa) and the Mashriq (the eastern part of the Arab world, located in Western Asia and eastern North Africa). The Mashriq, which apart from Arab countries also includes Israel, Turkey, and Iran, consists of three subregions: the Nile Valley (Egypt and Sudan), the Fertile Crescent (Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq), and the Persian Gulf (Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Iran, and Iraq), with Yemen in the latter subregion's sphere of influence.

Although this division is a matter of convention (Iraq and Jordan are listed in two subregions, while Turkey and Israel, although formally not part of the Fertile Crescent, are involved in the processes underway there), the countries comprising these subregions have clearly similar historical, social, economic, and political features, which underlie the internal integrity of each subregion but also serve to distinguish them from one another. The dynamic of the political processes unfolding there in the past few years is sufficient only for partial forecasting of interdependent development trends in these subregions. The developments in the Gulf and Fertile Crescent countries have a major impact on each other and also indirectly influence the developments in Egypt and Sudan and, to a much lesser degree, in the Maghreb countries. At the same time, a negative scenario for the Nile Valley countries can affect all countries in the region.

The interdependence of developments in the Gulf and Fertile Crescent subregions is and will remain asymmetric in the foreseeable future. On the one hand, the Fertile Crescent countries are a target of influence for Gulf countries, while on the other – they remain a source of threats and challenges, as well as geostrategic and human resources for them. This asymmetry means that the developments in the Gulf will continue to have a decisive impact on the Fertile Crescent subregion, as well as, though to a lesser degree, on the Nile Valley countries.

SUBREGIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



Sources: UN (2019), IMF (2019).

The Expanded Mashriq

Negative Scenarios: The Pendulum

The main causes for a negative scenario for the eastern part of MENA are the persisting Iran–Saudi tensions, a fragile socio-political stability in these countries, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen. The probability of this scenario rests on the security dilemma in Iran–Saudi relations, the belief of each of them in its decisive victory, as well as Washington’s traditional reliance on disagreements between the regional actors. At the same time, the developments of the past few months show that the positions of all the key players are gradually changing. Iran and Saudi Arabia, which came to the brink of a big war at least twice in 2019–2020, demonstrated the ability to quickly de-escalate tensions and rethink their reckless foreign policies.

The Saudi leaders’ striving to implement vital socio-political reforms and Iran’s need to stand up against tough economic sanctions forces their ruling elites to shift the focus to the domestic political agenda and to act more cautiously on the international stage. At the same time, the ongoing process of national consolidation and the military and political investments they have made in the Yemeni conflict, as well as in the Fertile Crescent countries, make a complete revision of their foreign policies unlikely and force them to maintain tension in bilateral relations.

The balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia is contributing to a negative international environment, creating a multitude of explosive situations, and also spreading rivalry among the Arab states of the Gulf to other regions (Yemen and Libya), which prevents settlement of conflicts.

Relations between the GCC states, first of all, between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (plus Egypt), on the one hand, and Qatar on the other, are a major gauge of developments under this scenario. Taken together, this makes any improvement in the Fertile Crescent countries practically impossible. Their development can proceed only under either a negative or a catastrophic scenario.

A negative scenario nearly amounts to maintaining the status quo. It includes failure to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict, which is fraught with a new aggravation in light of the upcoming elections in 2021. The ability to prevent this will largely depend on the Syrian government’s approach to the settlement of the conflict and to Syria’s post-conflict development. Syria’s post-conflict success depends on improving governance and fight against corruption, racketeering, and the shadow economy, which flourished in some parts of the country during the conflict. Failure to deal with these social ills will prevent an effective post-conflict recovery even with substantial foreign economic assistance. Lastly, the prevention of a new escalation will largely depend on the ability of the Syrian government to reconsolidate the people and carry through their post-conflict rehabilitation.

The unsettled Syrian conflict and ongoing Iran–Saudi confrontation will serve as a backdrop for the increasingly negative developments in Lebanon and Iraq, which will likely revitalize the issue of Iraqi Kurdistan’s independence and aggravate the Kurdish problem in other regional countries. Moreover, a possible separation of Kurdistan and political reconfiguration in other regions of Iraq would give rise to a new round of power struggle between the elite groups, as well as civil unrest.

Such developments in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq would marginalize the issue of the Middle East settlement in global politics and public opinion. In light of the ongoing Iran–Saudi confrontation, this promises the continued negative trend in the settlement of the Palestinian problem.

A catastrophic scenario for the Fertile Crescent countries includes new conflicts and increased civil unrest across the region. Years of political violence, a high level of militarization, the rise of the lost generation caught up in wars and conflicts, as well as considerable jihadist forces, which maintain significant resources despite having gone underground, make the situation particularly dangerous.

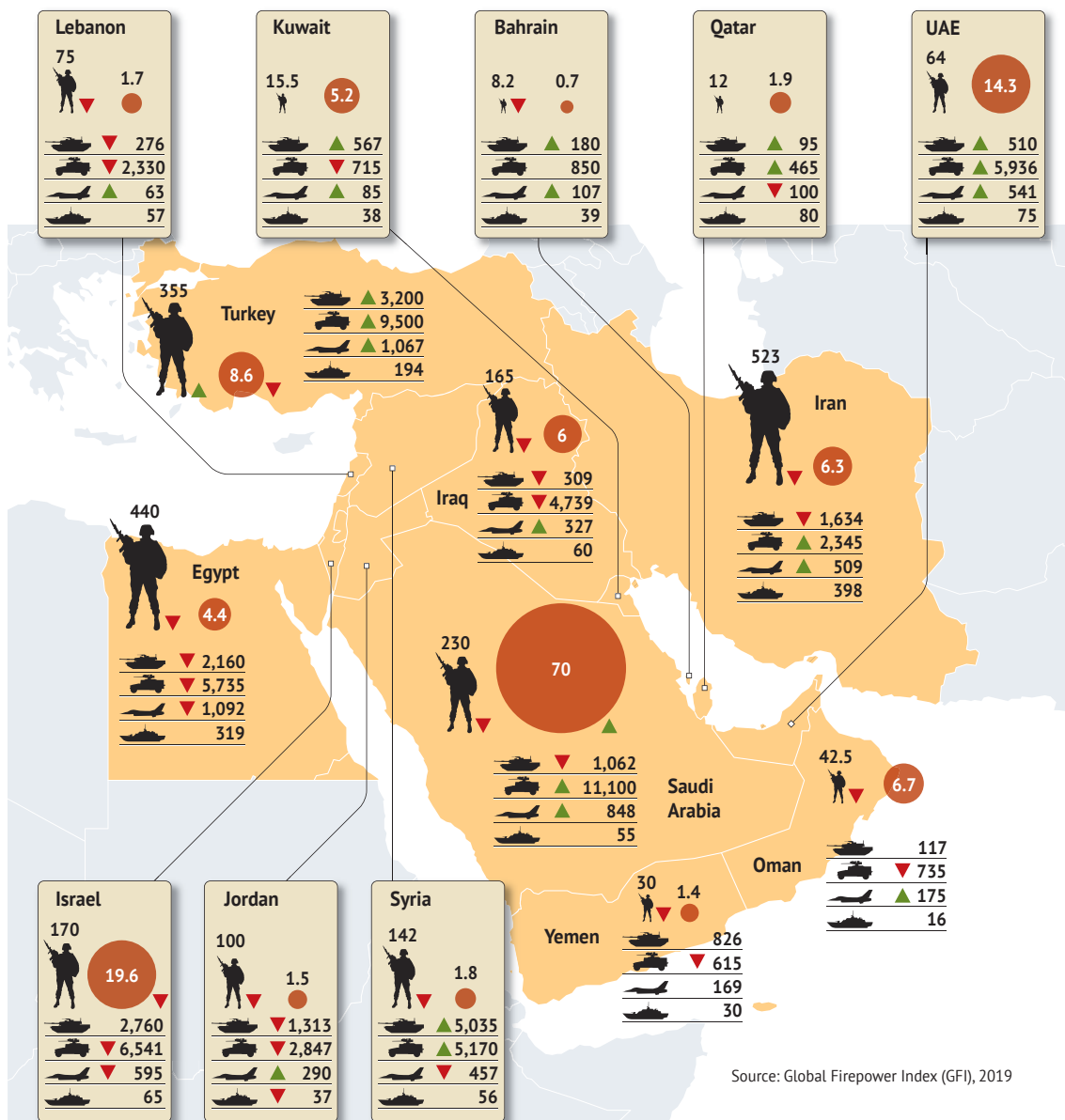
Deterioration in the Fertile Crescent countries could, in turn, catalyse negative developments in the Gulf subregion. This negative trend will have the most impact on Saudi Arabia, where complicated and potentially very difficult reforms are underway. In addition to the foreign policy threats created by the Iran–Saudi confrontation, violent conflicts in neighbouring countries, and terrorist activities, the kingdom could also face a number of social and internal political challenges.

Some of them are connected with the change of elite generations and a possible aggravation of their rivalry. The big role played by the political leadership and the fact that reforms depend almost entirely on Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman are increasing the country’s vulnerability.

Another set of risks is associated with possible growth of social tensions due to the rapid implementation of reforms. Even though the Saudi leaders rely on the broad social basis of the forward-thinking urban population to implement the reforms, resistance is highly likely from at least three other groups of population. One is the conservative part of society, including the traditional elites, which see the reforms as a threat to their interests and traditional way of life. Another group is comprised of the marginalized suburban population that tends to support radical conservatism. And lastly, there is the liberal part of society, which believes that the reforms are insufficiently radical.

Lastly, a third group of challenges is in a way traditional for Saudi society. These challenges can lead to an ideological and religious fragmentation in the region. The country is implementing a vital project of national consolidation and acceleration of the drawn-out process of creating a united civil nation, a path that the other Gulf countries have entered as well (e.g. the crisis in Qatar is encouraging a similar transformation of Qatari society). However, this project has come across resistance from the traditional pan-regional, tribal, and religious solidarity groups, which the kingdom’s external enemies could exploit if the regional conflict escalates.

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES



This does not mean that a negative scenario is unavoidable in Saudi Arabia and, subsequently, in several other countries that depend on it. Ultimately, not a single systemic player is interested in negative developments. Also, the traditional mediation mechanisms and solutions to social contradictions available in the kingdom, as well as its major financial resources, have so far been used effectively.

However, a negative turn in the Arabian Peninsula, even if unlikely, would have a destabilizing effect on the entire region, primarily on Egypt, because of its close economic, humanitarian, and military-political ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. A suspension or substantial reduction of financial assistance from the Gulf countries and the return of millions of migrant workers to Egypt would destabilize the country politically and aggravate the so far latent confrontation. A political weakening of Egypt would undermine its weakened positions when it comes to the distribution of the Nile's water supply. The obviously catastrophic nature of this scenario is strengthening Saudi-Egyptian co-operation and their governments' interest in mutual support aimed at preventing negative scenarios.

One more negative scenario for the Mashriq countries is based on the potential destabilization of Iran. Theoretically, it can be provoked by increased sanctions pressure, the striving of external players to destabilize Iran, growing struggle between the elites, and the encouragement of revenge-seeking aspirations in Iranian society. At the same time, Iran's complicated political system, the experience of dealing with mass protests, and the so far effective mobilizing ideology, which is regularly reinforced by foreign acts of anti-Iranian aggression, constitute major stabilizing mechanisms.

The situation in Iran will also influence its allies in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, as well as in the Gulf. However, it would be wrong to believe that a serious weakening of Iran would immediately improve the situation in these countries. The weakening of Iran would only provide additional incentives for the pro-Iranian military and political organizations' struggle for their own interests, as well as for the radical forces in Tehran that can take such additional incentives as a means of pressuring their foreign policy opponents. Taken together, this could increase the probability of negative scenarios in the Fertile Crescent countries.

Positive Scenarios: Interdependence

The list of positive scenarios is much shorter. Their likelihood depends on the maintenance of stability in Iran and Saudi Arabia, which should continue their reform policies. The need to focus on national development amid growing threats due to regional confrontation and declining trust for the United States, which has become less predictable and less reliable in recent years, could provide the necessary impetus for detente which started evolving in late 2019.

The next stage of the normalization process could be the development of a collective security system in the Gulf and, on a broader scale, in the whole of West Asia. It could be based on inclusive mechanisms comprising the Gulf countries (GCC states plus

Iran and Iraq), on Iran–Saudi agreements, or on a system of bilateral relations between the Gulf countries. It could cover the entire range or part of regional security matters. It could provide for using the existing GCC mechanisms or for creating new ones. No matter which approach and format is chosen, such a system would help gradually lower tensions in the region.

A de-escalation of Iran–Saudi tensions would allow the two governments to more energetically look for compromise solutions to a number of regional problems, including conflicts in Syria and Yemen and the developments in Iraq and Lebanon, which, if complemented with favourable conditions in these countries, would help normalize the situation throughout the region.

However, not all countries in the region would benefit from this scenario. The implementation of this scenario would push the Palestinian problem to the top of the international agenda, so that Israel would have to pro-act by strengthening its positions. This may eventually lead to a new escalation of the Middle East conflict.

Moreover, the normalization of Iran–Saudi relations could become a challenge for Turkey, which would take a political and ideological stand against these two powers and increase assistance to its regional allies, including Qatar, the normalization of Saudi relations with which would not be a direct result of reconciliation with Iran, as well as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Taken together with the numerous political, social, and economic problems in Egypt, as well as Riyadh's weakening interest in Egypt's military and political assistance amid diminishing foreign policy tensions, this can increase social and political turbulence in Egypt.

Lastly, Iran–Saudi rapprochement could become a challenge for the UAE, which would lose its standing as Riyadh's regional ally and would want to strengthen its positions, primarily by rallying the support of friendly forces in Yemen.

The Maghreb: Three Paths

In the foreseeable future, the situation in the Maghreb will only indirectly depend on the developments in the eastern part of MENA. In all likelihood, the key factors in its development will be Libya and particularly Algeria. Developments in both countries will in one way or another have an impact on the entire subregion. But European countries' and the EU approaches will be of an incomparably greater importance for the Maghreb.

Based on the above, we can outline three main scenarios.

The first scenario implies that the status quo is maintained. This means, in particular, that the Algerian leaders will manage to finalize the political transition by achieving a new balance of forces between different interest groups among the political elite, take effective steps to fight corruption, reduce the army's obvious involvement in governance, and launch the long overdue economic reforms. The latter, however, may well lead to greater social tensions and new hardships, which could threaten the polity.

Algeria's positive dynamics may become a factor in normalizing Algerian-Moroccan relations and removing the Western Sahara problem from the agenda (though without its final settlement), something that may have a remote consequence in the shape of greater motivation for intra-Maghreb integration.

This scenario also implies preserving the current configuration of the Libyan conflict, which, despite its highly dramatic nature, is having a very limited impact on the regional situation. To prevent this impact from becoming stronger, Libya must be guaranteed against both an inflow of numerous jihadist terror groups from other conflict zones and the strengthening of the external factor.

The second scenario allows for mass protests in Algeria becoming radicalized against the background of the political elites being unable to compromise either with the protesters or among themselves. This may energize jihadist movements, including those involving veterans of both Syrian and Libyan conflicts, who will see this as their historical opportunity for revenge. But increased political violence will be powered not only by Islamism but also Berber ethnic nationalism, primarily in the Kabylie mountainous region.

These developments may put Tunisia, a country sandwiched between two conflict areas, in a highly vulnerable position, given its military weakness and an economic crisis plaguing it for quite a long time. Besides, it is a homeland of several thousand jihadists fighting in conflicts all over the world.

Finally, the third (and the most positive) scenario implies not only a successful political transition in Algeria but also a settlement of the Libyan conflict, which will promote both a broader subregional integration and a trend for the Maghreb's limited Europeanization.

Today, the latter two scenarios seem less feasible than the first one. None of the Libyan conflict settlement projects has been implemented even in part. Settlement is being made unlikely by the country's huge stockpiles of weapons and extensive financial resources, coupled with the external players' unpreparedness to invest considerable military and political clout into the settlement process. Achieving settlement via a unilateral military victory amid an extreme weakness of the state institutions gives no hope for subsequent compromises or establishment of an inclusive political system.

The Regional Level: Fragmentation, Disintegration, Integration

If we take our analysis from the subregional to regional level and look at the MENA region as a certain whole, we will see that the numerous development scenarios related to its different component parts could be divided into three large groups: fragmentation scenarios, disintegration scenarios, and integration scenarios.

The fragmentation scenarios imply the loss of any regional unity and a transformation of the Middle East into a chaotic mosaic of loose elements, where isolated points of growth will exist side by side with broad zones of armed conflicts and disintegration of statehood, while hybrid forms of authoritarianism without ideology and non-institutionalized democracy will be almost undistinguishable from each other. The huge landmass from the Atlantic to Iran will become a vast 'Zone' from the Strugatsky brothers' Roadside Picnic, where daredevil stalkers will withdraw in search of wild luck. The global powers will try to establish security buffers between themselves and the 'Zone', while regarding the latter as a territory where they can have it out among themselves, achieve their ambition, or confirm their status.

To engineer this about-face in the region, an actual disaster for the entire humankind, the main players should primarily give up whatever foreign policy pragmatism they have left.

The last few years have demonstrated a high level of recklessness practiced by both regional and some global actors. But this recklessness seems to be generated by fundamentally different circumstances. The regional players, who have always been dependent on the world hegemons, may be reckless because of inadequate awareness of the limits of their own capabilities and possible risks. They are also involved in the vicious circle of the security dilemma. But things are different as far as the global actors are concerned. Although the Middle East plays an important role in world politics, none of them sees it as a space of its vital interests. Starting in 2003, the West, and particularly the United States, have demonstrated their readiness to take highly irresponsible steps on several occasions. The latest case in point is the murder of Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Committee (Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi), as well as their escorts.

Generally, it is the inconsistency and unpredictability of Washington's moves, the hallmark of its political behaviour in recent time, which may trigger the consummation of the fragmentation scenario.

Exacerbation of the existing conflicts or emergence of new conflict clusters may become yet another trigger. Government's inability to meet people's demands in a fitting and timely manner is an important, yet not the only, source of conflict. Some other likely sources are social overstress caused by accelerated reforms, the activities by outside forces, primarily anti-system players who have amassed in recent years an immense financial and human potential (e.g. al-Qaeda and ISIS, both outlawed in Russia), the impact of conflicts in neighbouring states, and the objective impossibility of solving vital problems within a brief timeframe. The inefficiency of international efforts to settle conflicts is another rather worrisome fact.

The disintegration scenarios imply multidirectional development in different subregions of West Asia and North Africa, with normalization in some of these

having no effect on development trends in others, or even affecting them adversely. The latter is possible, if, on the one hand, subregional contradictions continue to be carried over to neighbouring spaces (Iran–Saudi Arabia to Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, Saudi Arabia/UAE–Turkey/Qatar to Libya, etc.), and, on the other, if destabilizing social elements are ousted to armed conflict zones. The spillover of these practices in recent years is an important factor in the Middle East’s creeping disintegration.

Another likely source of disintegration is the desire to cut oneself off from negative political processes and intensify their cooperation with different regional spaces. To some extent, examples of this approach are provided by certain Maghreb states, such as Tunisia, which seeks to minimize border contacts with Libya, or Morocco, which has closed off its border with Algeria. At the same time, the two states are hoping to actively develop relations with their northern partners.

In absolute terms, this scenario implies disintegration of the Middle East and North Africa into several disconnected spaces, with each of them either forming a separate political region, or joining some other space and giving shape to a new regional, e.g. Mediterranean, unity.

Finally, the third option is integration, which is likely to emerge if some positive changes occur in every part of the MENA region. It implies its preservation as a political region whose unity is based on a new architecture and revamped international institutions. In order for this scenario to realize, it would be important to find compromises between the three existing alliances – Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt, Turkey/Qatar, and Iran – inducing other big states (Algeria, Iraq) to join the reintegration process, and facilitating positive change in the destabilized countries.

It is obvious that none of the above scenarios can be implemented in their pure form, but their description makes it possible to outline the main vectors of the region’s future development.

Russia and Future of the Middle East

Upon emerging as a key external player, Russia has faced a number of threats, challenges and risks, including hybrid ones, which directly affect its national security, as well as economic and political interests. To respond to them, it had to raise the level of its presence in the region, and in the recent decade Russian role in this part of the world has grown considerably.

While Moscow is strongly averse to any outside interference in internal affairs of states and is against the incitement of or support for ‘colour revolutions’ or ‘regime-change’ strategies, it is rapidly developing cooperation with most Middle Eastern states, including those that are in conflict with each other, cooperation

that in certain cases acquires the nature of a strategic partnership and predetermines its influence on the process that shapes their future. Today, whatever scenarios for the region's development come to life as a result of complex transformations, Russian involvement in the Middle Eastern affairs is undoubted.

Constructive equidistance, honest brokerage, rejection of reckless attempts by external and certain regional players to thoughtlessly substitute chaos for the existing order, and strong counteraction to terrorism and extremism are policies that increase the chances for positive scenarios.

No one in the region is guaranteed against the emergence of new black swans, something that may overturn even the most cautious forecasts. With predictability and consistency in its policies, Russia aims to promote these principles in the whole Middle East future development.

The Middle East in Search for Lost Awakening

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Introduction

The year 2020 was probably the strangest year of the 21st century so far. It also concluded one of its most eventful decades. For the Middle East, it began with the Arab Spring, which was the culmination of a long period of worsening political crises and increasing social tensions.

The Arab Spring, which promised to open the way to positive change in the region, turned out to be a major disappointment. People's hopes were dashed on the harsh reality of great-power interventions, violent regime change, occupation and the plunder of national wealth; rampaging terrorist groups that exploit religion; civil wars and conflicts, migration, human suffering and sanctions. The region plunged into a seemingly endless period of crises.

The decade ended with the COVID-19 pandemic, which worsened humanitarian conditions, hobbled economic growth and strained social ties in the region. The hope that it would trigger a fundamental transformation of societies, states and the entire system of international relations, with greater emphasis on sovereignty, independence, cooperation and mutual assistance, has not materialised. Still, the pandemic did reinforce some existing trends, which, taken together, can be described as promising a *new renaissance*¹.

The Middle East, which for a long time was looked upon exclusively as the object of foreign influence and a periphery of the world order, has turned overnight into a source of new trends in global development – not just a laboratory of global politics but a trendsetter. Protest movements rallying in the name of justice, a new role for religion in politics, heightened international competition, greater influence for regional powers often capable of outsmarting global players, and the securitisation of international relations are defining features of the modern world that evolved in the Middle East before spreading beyond its borders.

From a theoretical perspective, this conclusion calls for revising the scheme of global politics as a system of central and peripheral regions (West vs East and North vs South), which adequately described reality in centuries past.

There are no longer any central or peripheral regions, nor is it even possible to divide the world geographically in a binary way.

In practical terms, this means that the West has lost its ability to determine the path of human development or put forward “universal” ideals for the future. It also means that the long period of technological civilisation is over. Technological success has ceased to be a guarantee of leadership, but it is unclear what will replace it.

¹ “The Renaissance” or “the Awakening”.

On the other hand, rather than interpreting this Middle East renaissance from a global perspective, it can be understood as an element of the region's internal development rooted in a growing concern over issues of identity and a desire to rethink historical inheritance in Middle Eastern societies.

Three Periods of Renaissance

The idea of renaissance, as defined in this paper, can be regarded as a central metaphor in Islamic culture.

Prophet Muhammad offered a new concept of equality for humanity in one of his sermons delivered in Arabia in the 7th century. Fully comprehended only several centuries later, it dealt with the periodic recurrence of prophetic missions, which encouraged people to revive the idea of divine righteousness and attempt to restore justice. But every time they strayed from the righteous path, groping in the dark until a new messenger appeared. Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad was the last messenger.

The subsequent political development of the Arab/Muslim world saw an endless number of religious political movements that called for revival, the renunciation of ungodly novelties and a return to the path of the righteous forefathers. Examples include the Almoravid dynasty and the Almohad Caliphate in the Maghreb, the Wahhabis on the Arabian Peninsula, the Senussi in Libya, the Mahdist Sudanese, and many others.

In the middle of the 19th century, the idea of renaissance was given a new lease on life in the Arab provinces (vilayets) of the Ottoman Empire. The Ennahda (renaissance) movement and similar processes in other Middle Eastern societies were kindled by a desire to find more effective ways to overcome backwardness and national humiliation and usher in a period of reform and modernisation, as well as to better understand and support their intrinsic cultural and civilisational identity.

Arab intellectuals interested in modernisation turned their attention to European achievements – from technological to philosophical and political – including the concepts of nation, representative power and democracy. Their encounters with European thinking led them to take a fresh look at national identity and statehood.

The evolving concepts of Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism, as well as the pressing concern over how to balance tradition with modernisation, Islam with the modern state, and the boundaries of democracy and social justice, shaped the agenda of social and political debate for the next 150 years and laid out the greatest development challenges facing the region.

The second Arab renaissance was connected with the struggle for independence and the creation of new independent Arab states in the middle of the 20th century.

The first Ennahda (renaissance) movement was focused on culture and education and sought to promote the agency of Arab societies in the Ottoman Empire. The second renaissance took place primarily in the political sphere. It developed during the age of colonialism and took the form of the inspired efforts of national liberation leaders to achieve national sovereignty. The concepts of identity, the nature of statehood, democracy and state institutions were becoming more pragmatic and action-oriented. This led to the trichotomy of Islamism, secular nationalism and Marxism as the framework for the development of an overwhelming majority of state ideologies in the Arab world. Meanwhile, Western liberalism, while remaining on the Arab agenda, occupied a marginal position and was never fully accepted by Arab political elites.

The idea of Ennahda is connected with the Arabic political tradition, which sought to find its own way that differed from both the West and the East. But similar chapters can be found in the history of the Turkish, Iranian and Jewish nations. The Tanzimat reforms, Ottomanism and pan-Turkism, the Young Turk Revolution and the evolution of the modern Turkish state; the Iranian revolution of 1905–1911 and the reforms of the Pahlavis; plus the Zionist movement and the establishment of the state of Israel were the manifestations of the painful search for identity in a new modernised world.

The outlines of a third Ennahda became visible in the 2010s. Unlike the first two renaissance periods, it is developing not as a response to the challenges of colonialism, but primarily as the result of the stagnation of the development path taken during the national liberation period. This is why the new renaissance is directed not so much against external enemies, such as other states or the West, as against internal enemies.

Therefore, the post-colonial interpretation of the dramatic developments of the 2010s and the region's transformation, which enjoyed little attention before, appears to be increasingly relevant.

Indeed, the 2011 and 2019 mass protests were not directed against external actors, but against flaws in the political regimes at home, which were criticised as unfair, corrupt and even alien to society, and hence neocolonialist. These protests were fuelled by the rejection of foreign interference and the brazen encroachments on national sovereignty by great powers.

Middle Eastern societies acquired a new sense of agency, reconceived their identities and created new images of their social and political future during the revival period and the subsequent period of social and political reform, which was almost painless in some countries and resulted in civil war and catastrophic confrontation in others.

These images can be described by two Arabic words – *islah* and *tajdid* – which cannot be easily distinguished from each other in translation. Both words mean reform, but *islah* means qualitative improvement and the overcoming of divides, disharmony and disunity, while *tajdid* is interpreted as restoring something to its original

condition.¹ These concepts capture the two different logics operating in the modern period of renaissance in the Middle East, which are revealed in the changing self-perception of societies, states and the region as a whole.

The post-colonial renaissance in the Middle East largely forestalled the dramatic developments that took place beyond the region in 2020. The recent protests in the United States and Europe are about more than just questions of identity; they are also evidence of dangerously high level of mistrust in national elites, which are seen as an alien and often hostile force preventing societies from making progress on their own paths of development.

Renaissance of Societies

Each of the three renaissance periods in the 19th and 21st centuries was primarily a renewal of society. While confronting challenges and fighting colonialism and neo-colonialism, regardless of who was the perpetrator, societies were compelled to declare themselves agents of the historical process and thereby acquire a new quality.

The process of acquiring agency can be described with the aid of the historical and political theory developed by medieval Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), whose ideas have long generated only limited interest among Middle East historians and experts, but in recent years have acquired newfound resonance (in particular, the Russian Islamic scholar Igor Alekseev refers to them).

In his fundamental work, *Al-Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun proposed an original theory of statehood evolution based on the idea of constant confrontation between two communities – the peasant-nomadic (*al-umran al-badawi*) and the urban (*al-umran al-hadari*) people. The peasant-nomadic community, although less economically developed than its urban counterpart, is much more consolidated and therefore can resist the other group's pressure. The “rural” community prevails over the “city” from time to time, invariably bringing about the same cycle – the formation of a new statehood accompanied by higher living standards, followed by the disintegration of social ties, fragmentation and weakening.

In the modern context, there is nothing like a direct confrontation between rural and urban communities. The urbanization processes that have been rapidly unfolding in the Middle East over the past decades, marked by the erosion of tribal and clan ties, has moved the conflict described by the medieval historian to cities, the melting pots of modernised populations (the ‘new city,’ or *neo-hadara*), that are fully integrated into the modern economy and political system, on the one hand, and the less adapted groups who find themselves left out of modernisation and political develop-

¹ Muhamad Zaid Ismail, Norahida binti Mohamed, Nashaat Baioumy *Islah and Tajdid: The Approach to Rebuilding Islamic Civilizations*. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325123832_Islah_and_Tajdid_The_Approach_to_Rebuilding_Islamic_Civilizations

ment (the new rural people, or *neo-badawiya*), on the other. The model of political governance that took shape in Arab countries in the mid-20th century was actually based on the alienation of these groups from each other.

The confrontation between these two parts of society can play out violently or relatively peacefully. Furthermore, the new social agency reviving through that process can be realised either through *islah* or through *tajdid*.

If the *neo-hadara* take the path of *islah*, they seek to address the existing vices of the sociopolitical system primarily through modernising it, which generates a globalisation-based narrative highlighting sociopolitical issues that had previously remained relatively marginal – the fight against corruption and nepotism, the rights of subaltern groups, gender equality, and so on.

If this part of society sees its future in *tajdid*, its activity forms a conservative narrative, in which the main threat to the natural order of things comes from negative external influences, while the ideal is the restoration of the good old order from the 20th century.

At the same time, in cases where the *neo-badawiya* embrace *tajdid*, the result is a fundamentalist concept of going back to the time of our righteous ancestors and building a fundamentally new society and state, based on the ideals of the golden age.

When the *neo-badawiya* take the path of *islah*, they have to reject the existing political reality – more or less acceptable for the *neo-hadara* – as well as the ideals of religious fundamentalism, which leads to the need to invent a new order of things based on such values as social justice and social solidarity, most vividly reflected in the socialist narrative (table 1).

TABLE 1

	Neo-badawiya	Neo-hadara
Islah	Left-wing narratives (1)	Liberal narratives (3)
Tajdid	Fundamentalist narratives (2)	Conservative narratives (4)

It is obvious that the four narratives have different sociopolitical implications. Those who opt for the fourth quadrant are in the most advantageous position: if the *neo-hadara* embrace *tajdid*, it is about preserving the existing sociopolitical system with minor changes only, and the prescriptions for such changes are more or less familiar by now. Accordingly, the weakest position is the first quadrant, where

marginalised groups adopting socialist values need to consider taking over power and building a fundamentally new system of social relations. Supporters of the second and third options occupy the middle ground and, accordingly, are in the greatest tension with each other.

The four aforementioned approaches to societal renewal have always been out there, but as contradictions and competition intensify, each of them comes into greater conflict with opponents, which leads to a rethinking of identities, the formation of new consolidated groups and greater social fragmentation, at least in the short term.

Implementing these narratives in the sociopolitical landscape requires an institutional and ideological framework, neither of which fully coincide with the narratives themselves.

It would make sense if the *neo-hadara* acted through modern civil society institutions, while *neo-badawiya* relied on traditional social institutions. In reality though, because of the social proximity of the two narratives of the *neo-badawiya*, the two of the *neo-hadara*, as well as the similarity of values of *islah* supporters from different social groups and the adherents of *tajdid* – practically all of the narratives can be implemented through both modern and traditional institutions. The result is an increase in the number and variety of non-state actors vigorously borrowing from each other's experience.

However, it is possible to identify ideas and organisations that fit each of the narratives better than others. Conservatism, initially possessing a protective character and guarding the traditional model of state in some way, mostly favours vertical governance models tied to state power. This concept can certainly manifest itself in various political parties' activities; however, as a rule, they feel uncomfortable without constant state support. Fundamentalist groups are more inclined to use traditional or pseudo-traditional institutions. Even if they constitute themselves as political parties or NGOs, they mainly do so for tactical purposes and this formal identification does not reflect their actual socio-political goals. Liberal groups, as a rule, cannot afford to act as independent political forces, while their values lead them to reject traditional agencies and mainly act as NGOs. Finally, leftists have the greatest difficulty institutionalising – except when their discourse is not embraced by conservatives.

Many organisations are actually hybrids and embrace a wide variety of behaviours and supporters of different narratives in practice. Hezbollah is perhaps the most striking example of this, combining features of a political party, a social movement, an armed group, an NGO and a business. Its activity is a blend of fundamentalism and conservatism, with additional elements from the two remaining narratives. Its successes in recent decades have made Hezbollah's experience attractive to other groups seeking to emulate its approach to varying degrees.

Since the renewal of society implies stronger horizontal ties, organisations based on networking have become particularly relevant in recent years. At the same time,

new technical capabilities provided by information technology and the rise of mobile and internet communications facilitate such networking better when combined with communication models that were previously quite developed in the region. Suffice it to recall the Ismaili communities dating back to the 9th and 10th centuries, Sufi institutions or the Muslim Brotherhood organisation founded more than 90 years ago.

Due to greater networking, none of the narratives is unfolding within the narrow boundaries of nation states. Groups and organisations representing each of these narratives are integrated into broader regional networks, and their cooperation often involves more than exchanging ideas – they also provide very real mutual support, whether political, economic or military.

Today, the period of fierce confrontation between the *neo-badawiya* and the *neo-hadara* has most likely come to an end in most countries of the region. Attempts to implement fundamentally new statehood development projects have been largely unsuccessful, and the old elites have managed to retain their power, despite being substantially reconstituted. This applies not only to Egypt or Algeria, but even to Tunisia where the Ennahda Islamist party had to adapt to the existing political system and accept some of the republican values after becoming part of the government. This suggests the main dividing line will be between the *islah* and *tajdid* concepts, not the *neo-badawiya* and *neo-hadara*.

Renaissance of Ideologies and Development Projects

The preceding claim raises the question of the role that ideologies play in the region's politics. It is fairly self-evident that none of the aforementioned narratives can be directly correlated with any existing ideology. Islamist movements, Arab nationalists, left-wing parties and all others freely combine elements from all four types of narratives in their discourses.

This is partly due to the inertia of the entire spectrum of ideologies, which formed during the period of colonialism and national liberation struggles, when the political agenda and the very social order were completely different from what they are now.

At the same time, prototypes for the first two elements of the Islamism–Arab nationalism–Marxism trichotomy had manifested in the region's history long before the concept of political ideology had appeared. The mid-8th century confrontation between the Abbasids who preached Islamic egalitarianism and the Umayyads who relied on the Arab tribes may serve as a prototype for the confrontation between (pan) Islamists and secular Arab nationalists in the 20th century. Consequently, both Arab nationalism and Islamism should be viewed not as ideologies in their pure

form, but rather as ideological projections of the two forms of self-identification intrinsic to the region. And, if that is the case, it is quite possible to assume that they will persist even after the end of ideologies as such – a trend that emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century and was described by Jean-François Lyotard in his famous essay, *The Postmodern Condition*.

This might also explain the fact that neither the evolution nor disappearance of ideologies actually removed that trichotomy from the historical arena.

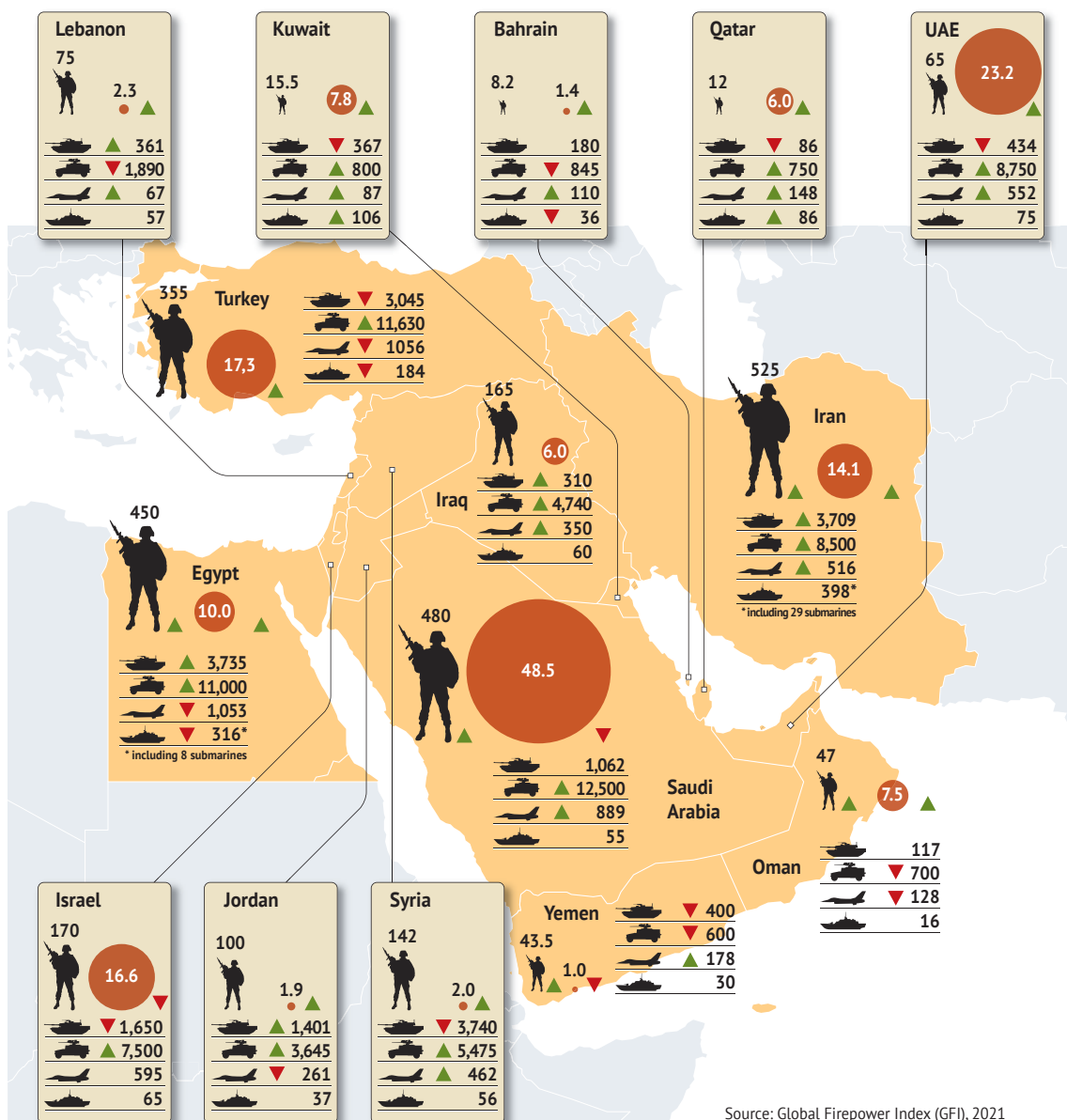
Some time ago, the idea of the final collapse of Arab nationalism after 1967 provided common ground. Today, however, it can be argued that Arab nationalism is reviving in at least three guises. **Firstly**, it is coming back as a reality of the cultural and communication landscape supported by a common labour market. That the protest movements in 2011 and 2019 swept Arab societies was no coincidence, and their participants made active use of information technology to organise. **Secondly**, it is manifesting itself in Baathist ideology, whose adherents have managed to stay in power in Syria. Incidentally, although relatively few in number, Baathist and Nasserist parties and successors of the Arab Nationalist Movement are represented in almost all Arab countries. And, **thirdly**, it is reviving as a foreign policy project in a number of Gulf states, primarily the UAE and Saudi Arabia, mainly in opposition to Iran.

Today, the collapse of Islamism and closely aligned movements is invoked as often as the collapse of Arab nationalism before it. Indeed, the Islamist project has faced a number of challenges in the past few years, and its supporters still have to devise appropriate responses. On the one hand, it was discredited by ultra-radical members of terrorist groups that were mostly defeated on the battlefield, although that defeat was far from final. On the other hand, moderate Islamists and even Salafis were largely integrated into political systems – political parties representing them are registered in almost all Arab countries with parliamentary systems (with the exception of Syria) and in most cases, they are represented in the legislature. As a result, Islamist forces have no other choice but to rethink their agenda in the new conditions, where confronting regimes accused of authoritarianism and posing as victims is not enough, while their record of savage violence has stripped them of support among the majority of the region's population and long since turned almost the entire international community against them.

As for the third element of the trichotomy, Marxism and related socialist ideologies, they appear still to be going through the painful process of rethinking their agenda and role in society. However, this does not seem to have limited the left's political activity. Leftist beliefs remain quite popular in Western Sahara, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Yemen and some other countries in the region.

This may also explain the weakness of left-wing movements compared with Islamist or Arab nationalist ones: unlike the latter, the former are solely based on ideology, not on ideological projections of identities. An indirect confirmation of this can be seen in the fact that none of the ideologies popular in the Western world

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES



in recent decades (subalternity, environmentalism, anti-globalism, and the like) has found broad support in the Middle East, although some of their elements may be borrowed by a wide variety of political forces. Other forms of identity, including local nationalisms or neo-imperial discourses, are gaining significant traction in the Arab world and beyond – in Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

If you look at the ideological quests in the Middle East through the lens of the previously discussed *islah-tajid* dichotomy, you can see that it does not correlate with large ideological projects, but rather with what Jean-François Lyotard described as local consensus. In political practice, the concept is primarily expressed in national development strategies.

The choice between *islah* and *tajdid* has to be made not only by civic activists, but also (to a much greater extent) by political elites who are required to respond to ever new global challenges and to the demands of their own societies alike.

Algeria, Egypt and Syria should be considered vivid examples of adherence to *tajdid*. The efforts made by their governments are aimed primarily at restoring the norm as they understand it and eliminating threats to the existing political and/or socioeconomic system. This explains their focus on achieving national security goals, which are interpreted extremely broadly, and tend to view development problems through the prism of national security as well. Although this approach may have seemed slightly archaic just recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has made it newly relevant in many countries.

Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are examples of *islah*. Not without difficulty and obstacles along the way, their governments are working towards a future based on the symbiosis of local cultural and historical traditions and external borrowings. The ambitious national development strategies adopted by the Gulf countries are manifestations of this approach to governance; its tangible forms include the knowledge-based economy being built in the UAE, the space programme, feminisation of the public sector, robotisation, Europeanisation of Moroccan and Tunisian legislation, and so on. Of course, in some cases these achievements are of a declarative nature and say more about development priorities than any actual profound changes, but this does not make their ideological component less important.

The choice of one of the two paths appears to be determined not only by the political system's configuration or its vulnerability, but also by the specific worldview of the respective elites. At the same time, both paths of renaissance have their strengths and weaknesses. Reform (*tajdid*) does not promise any breakthroughs in development, but should guarantee the restoration of the normal functioning of the system and its stability. The problem is that we never know how well the old governance system can adapt to changing conditions (both internal and external), and the securitisation of the development agenda can only temporarily ensure public peace. *Islah*, on the other hand, with all its tempting prospects, will most likely be difficult to limit to selected spheres of social life or the economy, which means that over time, there will be a need for political change.

Renaissance of Leadership and the Institutional Problem

If we look at development issues not from the perspective of the regional elites' ideological quests and self-awareness, but in the context of governance practices, then perhaps the key conflict that Middle Eastern states (primarily but not only Arab states) are facing today becomes clear – the long-term development trends and the measures required to make effective decisions here and now are in tension.

The long-term trends here are actually in line with global practice. Not without difficulty, democratic institutions of governance are spreading to all countries that have representative institutions. Electoral processes have become extremely important even in countries that operate in a state of permanent crisis. Civil society institutions are being strengthened, including in countries in conflict. It would seem that all this should suggest the obvious choice of renaissance through *islah* and, accordingly, institutional changes. However, institutions have always remained a weakness of Middle Eastern political systems, and the imbalances in their development that originated during the formation of statehood have never been overcome. Initially, the most effective parts of the state machine were military and security services and the technocratic bureaucracy, while the representative and judicial authorities, as well as party systems and civic organisations remained extremely weak. Once they become stronger through social modernisation, it will become necessary to change, if not the political configuration, then at least governance practices, which naturally renders those practices temporarily inadequate and increases security threats.

The heightened risks from social transformation and external influence create a *state of exception* (according to Carl Schmitt), in which systems that can immediately rally and respond to new challenges and threats are the most effective. This naturally increases the salience of the personality factor in governance and temporarily reduces the importance of institutions. Of course, further on, this can become a source of renewed authoritarianism. Indeed, Schmitt developed his state of exception and sovereignty concepts to legitimise dictatorship. However, along with the consolidation of public institutions, the prospect of accelerated modernisation from the top with a possible new escalation of conflict in the medium term seems to be more likely (the conflict can also be overcome non-violently).

However, no matter how developments unfold in the future, today we can assert that one of the forms of the new Ennahda is the revival of political leadership, which acquired new features that are fundamentally different from those of the first two renaissance periods.

Politicians were not the key figures in the first Ennahda at all; it was ideologists, intellectuals and educators at the helm, who saw their role mainly as

transforming culture and identity and only surreptitiously tried to influence the political process. Suffice it to mention such leaders of *islah* as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his disciple Muhammad Abduh or (outside the Arab world) Theodor Herzl. Only at the end of that period did leaders of national liberation movements begin to come to the fore.

The second Ennahda was led by politicians who proposed their own visions of the future: Hassan II, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Habib Bourguiba, Muammar Gaddafi, King Faisal and others. Their reformist activities were not so much driven by the need to respond to contemporary challenges, but by an interest in implementing their own development projects. They were later replaced by functionaries who sought to maintain the more or less effective work of the system already in place. The next change of generation was not directly related to the Arab Spring events. Mohammed bin Zayed, Mohammed bin Salman, Tamim bin Hamad, Mohammed VI, Benjamin Netanyahu, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Bashar al-Assad and even Abdel Fattah el-Sisi were not elevated to the vanguard of history by protests – many of them had been in power long before they began. However, some of those leaders were able to express themselves in new ways in time of protest, regional conflict and growing terrorist threats.

These leaders do not show the same interest in philosophical quests as the leaders of the first Ennahda; neither do they share the romanticism of the second, or the dull technocratism of the turn of the century generation. This constellation, brought to the fore by extraordinary circumstances that happened in a tormented region of a crumbling world, is emerging as a generation of tacticians. Their distinctive qualities are an ability to rapidly respond to new challenges, flexible views, and bold decision-making. That is why they are often difficult to deal with – their pragmatism eclipses all else, while any political strategy, if there is one, mostly emerges post factum. They do not seem to believe in ideology, but are prepared to use it to achieve coherent goals.

All this entails both pros and cons. Beyond an ability to quickly make difficult decisions and the political will to implement them, these leaders are capable of radically restructuring political systems for the future and overcoming institutional imbalances.

On the downside, the entire decision-making process is directed, if not by one figure, then by a narrow circle of people; horizontal governance models are dismissed, and emotion becomes an outsize factor in both domestic and foreign policy. In addition, the growing complexity of government systems raises the cost of error that can result from one-man decision-making, which, in turn, threatens to erode public trust.

The problems of development, institutional transformation and political leadership compel us to admit that the process of transformation in the Middle East is far from complete, and its recent deceleration is just an illusion.

Renaissance of the Region

The first and second periods of renaissance were connected not only with the changing societies and states of the Middle East, but also with the region's changing place in the system of international relations. During the first renaissance, the region was drawn into global politics through colonial governance. The second renaissance period saw the integration of young states into the bipolar system of relations, when the Middle East emerged as a political region within its current boundaries and created mechanisms of relations with the West and an internal architecture.

The third renaissance obviously involves a revision of relations with the world and a change in the region's configuration, and the parameters of both processes can differ.

One of the aspects of this transformation was pointed out nearly a decade ago by Mustapha Tlili, a prominent writer and diplomat who took part in many of the Valdai Club's Middle East conferences. He noted at one of them in the early 2010s that the Arab Spring presented the MENA states with two paths. One was rapid modernisation, integration into the community of the world's leading economies, stronger democracy and civil rights and freedoms. The other was a return to the archaic past, chaos and violence. Paradoxically, ten years later we can say that both scenarios have materialised. A distance of less than 1,500 kilometres separates Iraq and Syria, which were taken over by ISIS/Daesh (a terrorist organisation banned in Russia), from the UAE, which recently launched the Al Amal (Hope) probe to Mars, with female scientists and engineers making up 80 percent of the team. These 1,500 km are the distance between an archaic past and a high-tech future, between two fundamentally different types of economy, society, political system and views of renaissance. Although ISIS as a territorial entity has been destroyed, it still has numerous cells and an army of supporters with the potential to bring back the archaic past. As such, there still remain two potential scenarios for restructuring the region.

The normalisation of relations between several Arab states and Israel in late 2020, although largely based on opposition to Iran, will inevitably lead to strategic changes. Still, the lingering Palestinian problem, as well as the gap between the status quo and elementary ideals of justice, is preventing lasting peace in the region. However, the agreements normalising relations with Israel, which hold the promise of economic and technological connectivity, has clearly demonstrated the signatory countries' choice of development path.

But two obstacles threaten to hinder progress.

First, technological modernisation and the desire to remain at the forefront of the current industrial and technological revolution must be supported by a fundamental socio-political transformation as a compensatory means of overcoming marginalisation. It is unclear if this goal can be achieved through strong political

ARAB SPRING: 10 YEARS ON

The developments that erupted in 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa profoundly changed the political landscape of the region and led to civil wars, the overthrow of governments, and revolutions

What the Arab Spring has led to



Factors that gave rise to the Arab Spring



Demographic imbalances



Lack of social mobility



Striving to change elites



Corruption and nepotism



Unemployment



Natural disasters

Aftermath of the Arab Spring



Growth of armed conflicts
 The rise of religious extremism.
 The emergence of the terrorist group ISIS (banned in the Russian Federation)
 Increased narcotics and weapons trafficking
 Rise in the number of refugees (from 2 million in 2010 to 18.6 million in 2019).
 Millions of people were expelled from their homes and sought refuge in Europe and elsewhere



Change in external factors
 Change of the balance of power in the region
 Expanding Democracy
 Strengthening civil society



Free movement of militants
 between various states of the Middle East, North Africa and neighbouring countries
 Numerous "grey territories" beyond the control of the central authorities



Increasing social polarisation
 and the growing importance
 of socio-economic demands

Sources: news agencies, www.washingtonpost.com, gazeta.ru

leadership, wealth and cooperation with the world's technological leaders on the basis of complementarity.

Second, a clear choice of one option and consistent rejection of the other implies a split from some regional countries, enhancing external risks. Most people prefer to forget that before the Second Intifada some regional countries, besides Egypt and Jordan who maintained full-scale diplomatic relations with Israel, made a go at developing trade and even diplomatic ties with Israel to some degree, but the side effects were not worth the political risks these countries faced.

Another pathway of change involves relations between Arab and non-Arab countries. The process of national revival has swept Turkey, Iran and Israel no less than their Arab neighbours.

Of course, the so-called Turkish and Iranian models that were discussed in 2011 turned out to be inapplicable in Arab countries, though both Turkey and Iran have provided attractive examples of socio-political development for large groups of the population in the Arab world and beyond.

Although the Israeli model cannot be regarded as an example, for objective reasons, and therefore its leadership potential is greatly limited, the country has recently become better integrated into the Middle Eastern system of relations, as proved by the abovementioned normalisation of ties with several Arab countries.

As for Turkey, its dramatic resurgence and growing political ambitions can be seen as a kind of mega-trend of regional development. Analysts used to think that Turkey could only be a spoiler in the region and was unable to create the foundations of its own system of governance. We can see now that it is trying to overcome this limitation. Ankara is aspiring to become a regional power and create a system that would extend beyond the Middle East. As a result, the borders in the Middle East are changing and Turkey's conflict-based logic is spreading to the East Mediterranean and the South Caucasus. But it would be premature to say whether this process can become deeply rooted or will remain a projection of Middle Eastern battles.

Either way, it is clear that Turkey's adoption of a new role cannot be explained by political pragmatism alone, which cannot account for changes in foreign policy identity, but rather demonstrates that the Turkish elite is rethinking the country's role in global politics.

Iran is in a similar situation. The years-long process of its integration into the Middle Eastern system of relations has greater chances of success with the Biden administration in power in the United States. But there is no obvious solution to the main obstacle – Iran's differences with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Trita Parsi, the founder of the National Iranian American Council, believes that if Riyadh had to choose, it would have preferred an isolated Iran with a nuclear bomb to a non-nuclear Iran that is an accepted member of the international community. In other words, Iran without international sanctions is more dangerous for Saudi Arabia than Iran with the deadly bomb. James Dorsey from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University argues that Iran is a threat to Saudi Arabia's ambitions regardless

of the kind of regime in power. Since both are Islamic states, the only plausible conclusion is that this is not a religious rivalry but a confrontation of two nationalisms that weaponise their religious identities.

The revival of Arab states is mostly internally directed and involves a revision of national identities and development paths, whereas the revival of non-Arabic actors depends to a larger degree on foreign policy and evolving views of the role that these states play in the region and the world. This external orientation can only partly be explained by a desire to make up for the difficulties of internal development. A fuller explanation is that these states are drawing on their own imperial experience in the process of national revival and seeking to position themselves accordingly on the global political stage.

One more area of change in the Middle Eastern subsystem concerns conflicts. Although none have been settled yet, recent developments show that they no longer dominate the regional agenda and have largely lost their strategic significance.

Of course, the absence of a political settlement remains a problem in each particular case, as international mediation has come up short. However, it is obvious that the level of confrontation between external actors has diminished both at the regional and global levels. The chances for a settlement will likely increase, unless confrontation gains renewed momentum, for example, due to a shift in the balance of relations between the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, they can be undermined internally, for example, if the terrorist groups and organisations whose financing depends on conflicts resume operations. In this context, it is especially important to expand the settlement agenda to include armed militias and demilitarisation of the population. Unfortunately, these issues mostly remain on the fringes of discussions on peacebuilding.

The divide in regional development described by Mustapha Tlili will persist unless the countries in the throes of conflict restore peace and reintegrate into the Middle Eastern and global system of relations. Successful states can shield themselves from the negative influence of their neighbours, but there will continue to be an indirect influence. This influence includes the threat that violence and terrorism will proliferate, though the mere existence of these threats will limit the prospects of strengthening and restoring the balance of state institutions, as well as developing regional cooperation, let alone integration.

This transformation of regional relations is largely connected with changes in Middle Eastern countries' relations with external actors. The region will retain a major place in the system of international relations due to its location, population size, resources and symbolic significance, but the role of external actors in the ongoing processes in regional countries is gradually decreasing – a trend that will likely continue in the post-COVID world.

European countries have minimised their role in the Middle East, while the United States has maintained the policy course set by Barack Obama. But taking a step back from the region does not mean leaving altogether. More likely, the US

will make increased use of indirect engagement strategies and will continue trying to create a regional system of relations in which it does not regulate affairs directly.

Russia's role in the region will likely change as well. Although it has objectively increased during the past five years, Moscow never planned to replace the United States or Europe in the management of regional processes. After all, their experience was not very positive, and external management does not seem to have good chances given the increasingly complicated situation in the region.

Past positive interactions, the aspiration of Middle Eastern countries to diversify their non-regional ties and certain similarities between their socio-political processes perhaps hold the promise of greater cooperation with Russia. There are also obvious risks, because neither side has clearly articulated its foreign policy strategies. But risks can be neutralised by Russia's commitment to international law, respect for the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of regional countries, emphasis on equal and mutually beneficial cooperation, conflict mediation experience, appealing foreign policy initiatives such as the Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf, as well as its historically friendly ties with Middle Eastern countries. All this will be reinforced by Middle Eastern countries' increasing interest in developing ties with Russia.

Russia's New Middle East Strategy: Countries and Focal Points

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Does Russia need a new Middle East strategy? This is the first question that springs to mind. After all, Russia has been quite successful, in some cases even outperforming the Soviet Union. In fact, Russia has succeeded in developing a close relationship with Israel while maintaining its trust-based ties with Palestine, as well as building an alliance with Syria all while strengthening relations with Iran, which used to call the USSR a “Little Satan”. Who could have imagined all that? Could it even have occurred to Soviet leaders to call Saudi Arabia a strategic partner like Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak did recently?

Life moves on, and the Middle East is rapidly changing. Just as importantly, the global balance of power is also shifting. Russia is constantly on the move too, with all the developments in and around it, as well as its regional and global functions.

Russia’s main domestic and foreign policy priorities lie outside the Middle East region. With everything changing so quickly, how do you save what you already have while keeping up with the latest developments and trends, but without overexerting oneself on matters that are too far to be worth the effort? The answer to this question lies in the constant effort to improve, fine-tune, and amend Russia’s Middle East strategy in its structural and functional components.

Pillars for Russia’s Middle East policy

Russia’s policy stands on three main pillars: the **first** one deals with ensuring security and defence, the **second** one consists of building Greater Eurasia, and the **third** pillar is designed to create a favourable international framework for Russia’s technological transition and achieving technological breakthroughs.

Security and defence

The 2015 intervention by Russian troops in Syria marked a major turning point for Russia’s policy in general, justified primarily by the need to defeat terrorism in the far reaches by acting in a country which turned into a powerful terrorist enclave of global, rather than regional significance. Strategy-wise, this objective has been achieved, with terrorist activity in Syria and Iraq reduced to isolated incidents. Moving forward, it could even subside almost entirely, making Russian military presence less necessary.

Russia’s presence in Syria took on military and political dimensions, as it seeks to accomplish three goals: 1) ensure a lasting reconciliation between Damascus and the Kurds, as well as with other ethnic groups, sub-ethnicities and tribal groups under the nominal control of the Kurds; 2) secure the withdrawal of the United States from Syrian territory; 3) liquidate Turkish occupation zones in Syria. All this is designed to ensure a final resolution to the Syrian conflict, and from the point

of view of Russia's defence and security, it means a guarantee that it will not spread beyond Syrian territory.

With regard to terrorism, we will limit our argument here to organisations controlled by or directly linked to al-Qaeda¹ and ISIS². The fight against these structures has entered its final stage in Syria and Iraq, with terrorists still entrenched only in Yemen, although even there they are acting as someone else's tools rather than being fully self-motivated.

The main hotbeds of *organised* terrorism are leaving the Middle East for other regions. There are in fact two other regions: Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa along the Senegal-Somali line, which for that reason could be referred to as Africa's Islamist fault line.

The Taliban³ now rules Afghanistan. Viewed as a terrorist movement under international law, upon their taking power, the Taliban said they did not intend to expand beyond Afghanistan and have stayed true to their word, at least for now. However, ISIS with its expansionist agenda remains active within the country. This means that the Afghanistan threat is not illusory, although members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), in coordination with Iran, can effectively neutralise this threat. In fact, Iran has already been quite effective in preventing terrorists from Afghanistan from infiltrating the Middle East.

The second region, sub-Saharan Africa, is much bigger. It potentially poses an even greater threat than Afghanistan, which is primarily due to blurry borders between its countries. Geographically removed from Russia, this region does not seem to create any immediate threat to its security.

However, this does not mean that Russia has no business contributing to counter-terrorist efforts there. Russia can still carry out timely operations or provide military and technical assistance, as it already does for the Central African Republic and Mali. It can also focus on working with neighbouring countries and other Arab nations such as Egypt and Algeria, as well as with the Persian Gulf states.

All this suggests that terrorism is becoming less of an issue in the Middle East and no longer poses a serious threat to Russia's security. Still, one thing to remember is that while organised terrorism as practiced by al-Qaeda and ISIS may actually be fading into the political landscape, the aimless Islamist fighters remain on hand, making it tempting to use this force as a political tool, an Islamist strike force of sorts. Turkey has tested this scenario quite a few times already in Syria, then in Libya and finally during the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh. What happened in Kazakhstan in January 2022 showed that this tool can even be used in places where an Islamist revolution has no chance of succeeding. Today, it is too early to draw any conclusions from the developments in Kazakhstan before the investigation

¹ Banned in Russia.

² Banned in Russia.

³ Taliban is under UN sanctions for engaging in terrorist activity.

into these events is finalised, so it remains to be seen who specifically tried to draw Islamist terrorists into the conflict. Still, there is a real threat of various external and domestic forces building this factor into their agendas.

While terrorism may seem to be losing momentum, the threat of state-to-state, sub-regional or regional conflicts remains and is even growing. In fact, the biggest danger comes from challenges that could emerge in the future rather from the existing ones. The paradox with the Middle East is that the main hot conflicts currently unfolding there, except for the one in Libya, may well be waning, but at the same time their conflict potential has been on the rise, primarily affecting neighbouring regions such as the Eastern Mediterranean, the South Caucasus, and the Sahel. Tensions still run high in the Persian Gulf, as well as between Israel and Iran.

Most of the clashes in these regions, except in the South Caucasus, do not directly threaten Russia. Still, Russia must focus its peacekeeping efforts on preventing new conflicts and stopping the old ones from escalating, as well as dealing with their multiple consequences in all their diversity, since they create risks for Russia too.

For instance, Russia's military presence in Syria helps alleviate conflict-related risks in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, there is more to it. Russia's military bases, including the naval facility in Tartus and the Aerospace Forces' base in Khmeimim are Russia's only outposts outside its territory. With the weapons they have at their disposal, these two bases can effectively block the Black Sea straits, which could be instrumental in preventing escalation in the Black Sea basin. All of this is becoming increasingly relevant considering the growing tensions between Russia, on the one hand, and the United States and NATO, on the other. It is in this context that Russia's outposts in Syria can make a considerable difference.

Building Greater Eurasia

Political observers tend to treat Greater Eurasia as a marginal topic, dwarfed by global conflict, or view it as a too narrow a subject, for example in the context of China's Belt and Road initiative. From this perspective Greater Eurasia is sometimes reduced to cooperation between Russia and China, along with several smaller countries, mostly from Central Asia.

At this stage of globalisation, building Greater Eurasia is one of the lead, if not the key process, as evidenced by two objective factors: 1) the vibrant development of industrial clusters in East and South Asia and their need to export their products, from high-technology to consumer goods; 2) the connectivity revolution brought on primarily by the development of railway and road networks.

Shipments from South and East Asia to Europe are increasing every year with most of these goods delivered by sea. However, sea shipping is not keeping pace with growing trade volumes. In addition, even now rail and truck shipping takes half the time of maritime shipments, and the ongoing infrastructure upgrades could cut delivery times by two or even three times.

Most surface shipments transit through Russia. But what has the Middle East to do with all this? Let me explain. While shipments from East Asia do not come into direct contact with the Middle East, the situation changes once you turn to South Asia. The north-south corridor linking Russia's Baltic coast with Iran's Bandar Abbas port on the Indian Ocean takes on a central role. From there, Mumbai, India, is just a short way off by sea, and on to Karachi of Pakistan and ports of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the ASEAN countries. Today, it takes at least 20 days for goods to travel from south Iran to St Petersburg's suburbs, and another two to five days to reach other South Asian ports. Iran plays a key role in this project as a Middle Eastern power and a Persian Gulf state. Efforts to develop railway and road connectivity produce synergies enabling Iran to comprehensively develop its manufacturing sector. For this reason, Russia's cooperation with Iran, as well as with India, is a major factor.

The Arab Persian Gulf states have been increasingly interested in the Greater Eurasia project with Oman already taking part as an observer. Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait can also possibly join in as investors, shipping operators, or by contributing to infrastructure and other projects. Iraq is also closely following these developments.

All these developments are unfolding against the backdrop of major infrastructure projects in the region, primarily in the railway sector. Of these, many are already underway or are about to be launched. This is the case for example for the railway linking Saudi Arabia's west and east coasts or the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Latakia railway project. This could lead to a new branched transport network in the near future to supplement the already developed network of roads. All of this will transform the region's logistics. In addition, it will connect to the rapidly developing cross-continental network.

Doing everything to coordinate these efforts with the cross-continental corridors passing through Russia, under its control or with its participation, is in Russia's best interest. Otherwise, logistics chains bypassing Russia could develop. Until recently, this threat was largely ephemeral, since bypassing Russia meant transiting through regions suffering from political instability. However, gaining a foothold in the Persian Gulf region and Mashriq, the eastern part of the Arab world, in general has strategic importance.

Creating a favourable environment for Russia's technological breakthrough

In recent years, Russia's leadership has been quite active in shaping its relations with America and Europe, as well as countries in East and South Asia in a way that would facilitate a technological leap forward. This includes dealing with outside threats, as well as promoting wide-reaching scientific and technological collaborations.

There is potential for working with some countries in the Middle East, especially in the digital economy, the creation of artificial intelligence and its applications in various sectors of the economy, management and social services, as well as in pharmaceuticals and reproductive health, for making new products. In fact, Russia has already started cooperating along these lines with Israel and the UAE.

Having enabled Israel and the UAE to establish diplomatic ties, the Abraham Accords paved the way for the emergence of a bilateral axis on science and technology, which could create new opportunities for Russia. Researchers from the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences¹ demonstrated that Russia has everything it takes to be part of this effort, and even serve as a driver in regional science and technology. Other Persian Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia, will want to join this axis despite the serious obstacles they may face in openly engaging with Israel.

Of course, Middle Eastern countries will hardly be instrumental in enabling Russia to achieve a technological breakthrough. That said, cooperation with Israel and the UAE, both tech-savvy nations, as well as the funding opportunities offered by the Persian Gulf countries and cooperation within the OPEC+ format, coupled with European cooperation, including with Germany, Austria, France and Italy, as well as with Asia's pioneering tech countries like China, South Korea and Singapore, could enable Russia to achieve its objectives. Incidentally, OPEC+ and the resulting close ties with Saudi Arabia to regulate the global oil market has critical importance for the Russian economy, including in terms of accumulating resources for achieving a technological breakthrough.

Country-level and sub-regional priorities in Russia's Middle East policy

Having defined the key vectors of Russia's Middle East policy, we can now look at the priorities at the country-specific and sub-regional levels. This includes Syria for defence, Iran for a cross-continental strategy, the Persian Gulf countries in general for promoting multilateral cooperation, as well as Israel and the UAE for promoting cooperation in science and technology. Does this mean that major regional powers like Turkey and Egypt are out of the picture? Definitely not. That said, relations with them will develop in the context of the priorities as stated above.

¹ Svetlana Babenkova, Dmitry Maryasis. *Palestina I Israil: tsifrovaya ekonomika kak platforma dlya budushchego effektivnogo vzaimodeistviya* [Palestine and Israel: The digital economy as a platform for future effective cooperation]. Moscow, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2021. 286 p.

Syria

Syria has a clear-cut role in Russia's defence policy. However, on its own, Russia can hardly satisfy all of Syria's needs in terms of post-war reconstruction. Much will depend on cooperation with Iran and China, although this approach has its limits. That said, working with the Persian Gulf monarchies will also be instrumental, primarily the UAE, followed by Bahrein, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

Iran and the Persian Gulf

Once the conflict in Syria runs its course, the Persian Gulf will find itself in the centre of the Middle East. It is here that most of the region's resources can be found, important assets in global terms, as well as within Eurasia, especially the eastern and southern regions. At the same time, the Persian Gulf could also emerge as a conflict prone region, inheriting this from the Middle East.

Finding a comprehensive solution to Persian Gulf security challenges is one of the key elements in Russia's Middle East policy. Not long ago, its proposals on building a collective security framework for this sub-region might have seemed like an utopia, but today they have become relevant with most regional and global actors praising the initiative.

To demonstrate this point, the Institute of Oriental Studies, together with the Russian Foreign Ministry, held an international expert meeting on security in the Persian Gulf in December last year. It brought together representatives from almost all countries belonging to this sub-region, with Qatar and Oman the only exceptions, as well as most other Middle East countries, including Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Egypt, along with representatives of the EU, the United States, India, and China. For many countries, including India, this was the first time they attended this forum.

The participants affirmed their commitment to drafting a common expert document. If adopted at the political level, it could lay the groundwork for turning the Persian Gulf into an international security area paving the way to promising international cooperation.

What indicates that the outcome of this meeting is more than just expert expectations?

First, the biggest and potentially the most dangerous regional conflict is between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but this seems to have died down. With a return to the international deal on the Iranian nuclear programme, and with most sensitive bilateral issues resolved, for the first time in many years the two countries launched direct talks in Baghdad. So far, they have not helped restore bilateral relations, but the very fact that the two are talking inspires hope. Many pitfalls remain though, for example the Bahrein issue, but the overall context of an Iranian-Saudi settlement certainly dwarfs those.

MIDDLE EAST: HOTBEDS OF TENSION AND RUSSIA'S PRIORITIES

Terrorist organizations and conflicts



Terrorism



Conflicts



Danger

"Africa's Islamist fault line"

Sahel

Country-level and sub-regional priorities in Russia's Middle East policy



Defense



Cross-continental strategy



Cooperation



Cooperation in science and technology



Exclusive relationship



Caution

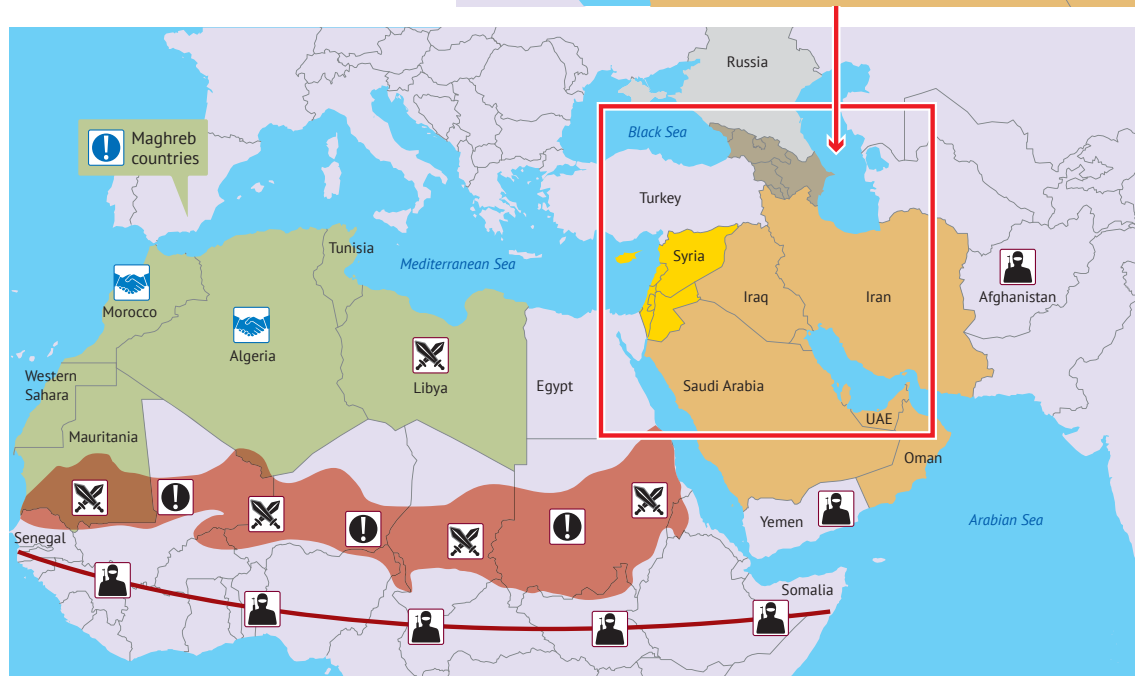
Preventing escalation in the Black Sea basin



Aerospace Forces' base in Khmeimim



Naval facility in Tartus



Sources:

Second, tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been easing. Despite the remaining controversies, at least the two countries have restored their political relations.

Third, Russia has developed steady and, in most cases, friendly and trust-based relations with almost all countries in the region, primarily with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The recent visit by President Ebrahim Raisi to the Russian Federation demonstrated that in some areas Russia's relations with Iran have been elevated to a strategic partnership. The same applies to the UAE.

Saudi Arabia

Until recently, Russia had quite a challenging relationship with Saudi Arabia. However, the two have been so effective at working together within the OPEC+ format since 2020 that Russia went as far as referring, and not without reason, to these relations as a strategic partnership. Russia has been focusing on promoting closer economic and political ties, and the response from its Saudi partners has been quite positive. The opportunity to work with Russia to deliver on the most far-reaching structural economic goals currently pursued by Saudi leadership is a major factor in bilateral relations.

Ending the conflict in Yemen is a delicate and extremely important issue for the kingdom, for which it is a burden that stands in the way of economic reform. Russian diplomacy could help Riyadh withdraw from the Yemeni conflict without losing face.

Considering all these circumstances, Russia could play an important role in shaping an international security area in the Persian Gulf, which is not the same as acting as a mediator in local conflicts. Instead, Russia could operate as a party to a future regional collective security system. There are reasons to expect regional actors to respond to this in a positive way. Apart from Russia, China and India could also aspire to this role. If this framework begins to materialise, the United States and the Western countries would hardly seek to find a pretext not to be part of it.

This scenario may seem excessively optimistic, but it doesn't mean that it cannot guide Russia's policy in this sub-region. The Persian Gulf is the main political development driver for the entire Middle East, which means that Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan could benefit, both economically and politically, from efforts to build a collective security system.

Israel

Developing relations with Israel is one of Russia's top priorities in the Middle East. This is a very sensitive issue for many Arab countries and Russia's Islamic partners in general, who are unwilling to accept that Israel and Moscow do need to work together in the spirit of mutual understanding.

Ironically, a restored relationship with Israel has resulted in more cooperation with the Arab world. Countries like Egypt and Jordan who have also established relations with Israel cannot now blame Russia for moving in the same direction and they are willing to promote contacts. The fact that Israel has established relations with several Persian Gulf countries further emphasises the balanced nature of Russia's policy.

Both Russia and Israel benefited from closer ties, which is easy to explain. Prominent members of the Israeli elite, including David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, Avigdor Lieberman and Natan Sharansky, all grew up in Russia or in the USSR. There is also the "Russia street" factor: after all, 20 percent of the country's population has Russian or Soviet roots. Those who moved to Israel maintain close ties with the relatives and friends they left behind in Russia and other CIS countries. Cultural and historical ties are also strong. Entrenched in the political subconscious, the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust bring the two peoples closer together. All this can facilitate cooperation in multiple fields set to play a pivotal role in the 21st century, including IT, the digital economy, artificial intelligence, etc., considering that Israel is one of the most advanced countries in the world, let alone the region.

Of course, it would be misleading to paint an entirely rosy picture of Russia-Israel relations. As known, Israel is the closest regional ally of the United States. This relationship cannot be seen as unilateral dependence, considering the power of the Jewish lobby in the United States and the leverage this gives Israel over US politics. Even if the close alliance between Israel and the United States sets the tone in Israeli politics, including the way the country frames its relations with Russia, it can be argued that to an extent Israel enjoys a free hand in its relations with Russia.

The disagreements between Israel and Russia boil down to three geographic locations: Palestine, the Golan Heights, and Iran.

On the Palestinian issue, three factors explain why Russia and Israel differ so much and have little chance of converging on anything in the near future: the creation of a Palestinian state, its capital in East Jerusalem, and the Jewish settlements on Palestinian territory. The international legal framework sets a clear path for resolving all these three contingencies, and Russia has been consistent in following these tenets, unlike Israel and the United States who, according to Russia, have used various manipulations for undermining efforts to settle these issues. The East Jerusalem and the settlement problems could be resolved easily if Israel had the good will to do it, as it once did by evacuating its settlers from the Gaza strip.

However, formed by wide-reaching party coalitions, governments in Israel become hostage to the political forces who firmly oppose any compromise with the Palestinians. This applies to creating the Palestinian state, further undermined by what currently seems to be a still non-repairable political split among

the Palestinians themselves with a Fatah-led coalition controlling the West Bank, and its Islamist nemesis Hamas ruling Gaza while recognised as a terrorist organisation by Israel, the United States and several other Western countries.

Announced by former President of the United States Donald Trump, the Deal of the Century consisted of the US recognising Jerusalem as Israel's outright capital and moving its embassy there. This seriously undermined the position of the Palestinians, for whom the decision by several Persian Gulf states to establish diplomatic relations with Israel was also an act of treason. As a result, the situation on Palestinian territories remains extremely volatile, and even the slightest escalation in Israeli-Palestinian relations results in riots and agitation in the West Bank, accompanied by missile launches from Gaza targeting Israel.

Russia is the only global power with whom both sides can cooperate. The Biden administration has been showing that it can be more flexible on the Palestinian issue compared to its predecessors, but this has not had any meaningful effect on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

All this has much in common with the Golan Heights, in the sense that Russia does not recognise Israel's annexation of this Syrian territory, but this does not change anything because the Syrian government, together with its Russian ally, have been prioritising more urgent matters. Once they focus on Syria's territorial integrity, the Golan Heights issue will be back on the agenda.

As for the Israeli-Iranian standoff in Syria, Russia's position could be described as "this is not our war". It is for this reason that Russia turns a blind eye to Iran's threats toward Israel, or Israel's strikes against Iranian and pro-Iranian forces in Syria when they were believed by Israel as posing a real threat. Moscow has limited its role to trying to separate the conflicting parties. Sometimes it succeeds in its efforts, like during the liberation of the south-western provinces by the Syrian army, when Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanon's Hezbollah were persuaded not to take part in the operation, while Israel agreed to refrain from air and missile strikes. These developments are a matter of concern to Russia, considering the danger to Syrian and Russian installations posed by Israeli incursions. Of course, Russia and Israel do have an agreement on preventing incidents but have been unable to avert all threats.

Turkey

Russia sees Turkey as a key country in its regional policy, although their relations lie outside Russia's Middle East policy priorities. Not only because Turkey simply fits badly into Russia's strategic interests from the perspective of east-west or north-south transcontinental communications, but it acts as a territory through which these flows can bypass Russia making them hard for Russia to manage.

Turkey is Russia's largest regional trade and economic partner. With trade at about \$30 billion in 2021, it is far ahead of Egypt, the UAE, Israel, and Iran, and double in fact the trade volume with Saudi Arabia, let alone other countries. As far as gas transit and distribution are concerned (Blue Stream and TurkStream pipelines), Turkey has every right to be called Russia's strategic partner. However, unlike Israel or the UAE, scientific and technical cooperation has been virtually non-existent.

Political relations have been ambivalent. In late 2015, the two countries were on the brink of war, but two years later they were once again working together within the Astana format. Still, even in this framework they faced challenges. Russia worked with Iran and Syria to support Damascus as an ally, while Turkey stayed on the other side of the barricades and maintained contact with radical forces, including Islamists fighting the Assad regime, and sometimes even terrorists. Bringing such a controversial partner to the negotiating table, accompanied by the radical opposition, was no easy task.

Nevertheless, the Astana format has been remarkably effective. It provided for the creation of four de-escalation zones, of which three were completely cleansed from terrorists and other radicals in 2018. This fully removed the threat to Syria's four main cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, and the government restored its control over three quarters of Syria's territory. Without Turkey's cooperation all this would have been impossible. In fact, Turkey acted as a guarantor for enabling radicals opposing reconciliation to leave the three de-escalation zones with their families for Idlib or to the Turkish occupation zones in Syria.

The fourth de-escalation zone, Idlib, remains the only blood stain on Syria's territory. Pro-Turkish forces there are neighbouring (not nearly always peacefully) upon terrorist groups formed by al-Qaeda remnants. Russia continues to work with Turkey on Syria, but without Turkey's presence in this terrorist enclave, the Syrian army would have long cleaned it up with the Russia's (and Iran's) support. The only way to explain Turkey's occupation of northern Syria, in violation of international law, is to argue that it suggests an attempted annexation, which Turkey refers to as efforts to "support opposition forces". Russian diplomacy and its military and political assets will have to be as flexible as possible to resolve this issue.

On the Syrian track, relations between Russia and Turkey present a web of contradictions which go far beyond Syria. There is the Turanian vector in Turkey's policy, the bid to support the Muslim Brotherhood¹ in the Arab world and beyond, Turkey's refusal to recognise Crimea as part of Russia and support for revanchist elements among Crimean Tatars, as well as Turkey's ambiguities on the Russia-Ukraine controversy, and the revival of the historical struggles with the Armenians and the Greeks. All this is definitely a matter of concern for Russia, its civil society

¹ Banned in Russia.

and political class, especially when dealing with political incidents which can be viewed in Russia as confrontational.

At the same time, the Justice and Development Party is a moderate rather than radical Islamist force, including in its overall foreign policy, albeit with some exceptions. The Ottoman and the pan-Turkic vectors come from Turkey's efforts to move away from Atatürk's pro-European policy since the EU's doors remain closed to Turkey. This does not mean that Russia and its CSTO allies do not face any real danger here, especially regarding the concept of building a Turkic alliance. It was this project that paved the way for Turkey's direct involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 on Azerbaijan's side. However, by leveraging its peacekeeping role and commitment to a political settlement, Russia has been able to level-out Turkey's one-way advance in its tracks on this front.

Turkish experts viewed the CSTO's mission in Kazakhstan in 2022 as a blow to Turkey's pan-Turkic aspirations. It has yet to be proven that Turkey had a role in what happened there, but the fact that Islamist mercenaries were involved is a clear reference to the methods Turkey used in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Of course, not everything in Turkey's policy is negative for Russia. In fact, some of the initiatives Turkey has taken undermine unity along NATO's southern flank. This includes the decision to buy the C-400 missile systems. Turkey's actions in the eastern Mediterranean, from Libya to Greece and Cyprus, also undermine North-Atlantic unity in this region.

Egypt

Relations with Egypt cannot be viewed as a Russian Middle East policy priority. Still, Egypt is a major Arab country. This Middle Eastern nation has more than double the population of its Arab neighbours. This is a country with developed manufacturing and agricultural sectors, and is culturally sophisticated and has considerable brainpower.

Signed by the presidents of Russia and Egypt, the Agreement of Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation came into force in January 2021. It covers a broad range of cooperation initiatives, including those aimed at modernising the Egyptian economy, creating a Russian economic zone near the Suez canal, technology transfers, building El Dabaa, Egypt's first nuclear power station, as well as military-technical facilities. According to the agreement, the relations between Russia and Egypt will take on a regional dimension, which could evolve into a pan-African policy.

All this would seem to make Egypt a priority country in terms of Russia's Middle East policy. However, several restricting factors exist.

First, Egypt depends financially on the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. While accepting a trilateral or multilateral cooperation agreement

with the latter two could be possible, this is a non-starter for the United States. Egypt is the second largest recipient of US financial aid in the Middle East, which seriously limits its ability to take independent decisions. For example, Egypt had to withdraw from the deal to buy the Russian Su-35 aircraft. Of course, other Russia-Egypt deals could also fall apart due to American sanctions.

Second, Egypt lags far behind Israel and the UAE in terms of its scientific and technological development. For this reason, cooperation on high-technology, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence could become a one-way street, which would be unacceptable to Russia in the current environment.

Maghreb countries

The Libyan conflict acts as a constraining factor in terms of Russia's relations with the Maghreb countries, isolating them from the rest of the Arab world. This is a major obstacle for Russia, since without direct contacts there are heightened economic and political risks standing in the way of priority undertakings. This does not mean however that selective cooperation initiatives, for example with Algeria or Morocco, have to be avoided, but Russia needs to be extremely cautious considering that the two countries are in a state of conflict.

The collective West in the Middle East

Russia has no doubt been quite successful in the Middle East and can further expand its regional foothold, but it would still be naive to claim that it can push the West out of the region or force the United States to abandon it altogether.

One thing that does seem to be fading away is the notion of a collective West as applied to the Middle East. The West's attempts to channel its regional engagement through NATO have largely failed, while attempts to replace it with its surrogates like Washington-led grand coalitions have also been unsuccessful in both Iraq and Syria. Solutions along these lines do not seem to fit into the current environment.

Thus, there is a better case for discussing the United States and its policy separately from Western Europe, meaning Germany, France, Italy and Britain as its leading countries, rather than the EU as a whole, since it has so far been unable to come up with a common Middle East policy.

There are two main reasons the Middle East now plays a smaller role in US politics. One is a waning interest in Middle East oil, as well as the fact that geopolitical priorities have shifted to other regions, primarily the Asia Pacific and Europe. This led to the idea of scaling down the military and political exposure in the Middle East, a major burden in both geopolitical and financial terms. It has to be emphasised that, **first**, this decline in interest is relative. **Second**, the withdrawal is limited to locations where America's presence is becoming

meaningless, in which cases it is already minimal and boils down to military instructors and people in charge of military and political cooperation with Iraq, or too risky, which applies to Iraq, as well as Syria, where US military strategists are afraid of falling into a geopolitical trap and for that reason are pleading for a gradual withdrawal to save face.

This situation opens new opportunities for Russia's Syria policy. While it can hardly aspire to replacing the United States in Iraq in the current conditions, Russia faces the risk of being drawn against its will and interests into the confrontation between the United States and Iran.

As for other parts of the region, the United States has no plans to leave any of the rest of it. The US is maintaining its bases in Qatar and other Gulf countries, and its strategic cooperation with Israel will carry on. There is an opening for Russia to step up its cooperation with the Gulf countries, Israel and Egypt, but the Russian Federation will not be able to compete with the United States on this front, considering its financial, economic, scientific and technical capabilities.

As for Western Europe, part of its economic elite, most notably in Germany and Italy, as well as the military establishment in France could be interested in engaging in joint projects with Russia on coordinating their Middle East policies, although the increasingly confrontational nature of Russia's relations with the West will stand in the way of any attempts to make these initiatives a reality.

In lieu of an epilogue

International politics has entered a new phase with the disappearance of a homogeneous world order. A more or less single set of rules has been replaced by multidirectional global processes bringing the promise of reshaping the global economy in the decades to come. This is accompanied by both Russia and China stepping up their game in their relations with the West at the same time, although in slightly different manners. Competition between the major powers is also on the rise. The United States is revisiting its priorities, dropping those that have become less important, while acting more proactively on those that remain. More and more actors now influence the global situation, while those who only recently aspired to a leading role have become less important. These and other processes create a new framework for all international actors and regional relations.

The Middle East has retained a central role throughout human history by taking the lead, subjected to outside influences, or determining the balance of power in other parts of the world. There is no doubt that it will retain its key international role in the future. It is no less obvious that it will be different from what we have grown used to throughout the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st century.

Russia is entering this new stage as a major force in the Middle East, and quite a relevant one too. Perhaps, it can be viewed today as the most influential of the outside forces. This opens new opportunities in the region and in the broader international arena. However, it can also create new burdens for Russia's strategy if Moscow fails to stick to its policy of proactive, constructive, but at the same time equidistant, flexible engagement with a touch of creativity for untangling regional issues. The threads forming this node of problems come from far and wide, and are pivotal in the security and stability of all the neighbouring regions.

There may be a plethora of the most complex developments in the Middle East, but fortunately, if the experience of the past decade is any guide, we can rest assured that Russia's leadership, politicians, diplomats, the military, and intelligence services have the experience they need to draw the right conclusions and take the appropriate action.

The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World

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Introduction

The third decade of the 21st century started out with extremely dramatic events. The COVID-19 pandemic, the armed conflict in Ukraine, the exacerbating Russia-West confrontation, the rapid strengthening of the global role of the global majority countries (countries outside the Western alliance), the global food crisis and aggravated environmental threats taken together have spurred the long process of collapse of the international political system, leaving out of sight what may come to replace it.

The world has crumbled.¹ As was foretold, the order has given way to anarchy², and there's no end to it in sight. The time to come of age³ seems to have arrived, but no one can say what it really means and what the new adult world will look like.

Polycentricity is a sacred concept, but how can we fill it with specific content and use it to make a long-cherished image of a fairer, appealing and reliable future a reality?

The Middle East appears almost redundant in this new brutal and uncertain reality. The violent upheavals that unfolded there over a decade drew everyone's attention, but now they have suddenly found themselves almost on the fringes of international politics. Even though the region is still there and its ongoing crises and conflicts have remained unresolved, and some of the Middle Eastern countries are vocally asserting themselves in the international arena, the future of the Middle East in the new world appears uncertain. We will try to outline it in our analysis of intra-regional and global factors.

Internal factors: an illusion of silence

During the first decade that followed the Arab Spring, the situation in the region was dominated by armed conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen. They were in the public eye, dozens of political initiatives were advanced to settle them, and regional alliances were formed around them. However, the situation has changed.

¹Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. Living in a Crumbling World. Valdai Club Annual Report, Valdai Discussion Club. 2018. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/living-in-a-crumbling-world/>

²Timofeev I. A New Anarchy? Scenarios for World Order Dynamics, Valdai Discussion Club. 2019. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/a-new-anarchy-scenarios-for-world-order-dynamics/>

³Barabanov O., Bordachev T., Lissovolik Y., Lukyanov F., Sushentsov A., Timofeev I. Annual Report: Time to Grow Up, or the Case for Anarchy, Valdai Discussion Club. 2019. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/annual-report-time-to-grow-up/>

Conflicts continue there, but they have lost their central role. The importance of confrontation between international alliances has waned as well. Seemingly insurmountable contradictions between Israel and the Arab countries, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, Qatar and other GCC countries, and so on have been alleviated by diplomatic initiatives in recent years. This has created an illusion of the situation regaining normalcy, but, ironically, it has not led to the formation of a new regional relations system. The Middle East seems to have been put on hold, and the differences between Iran and Israel, which are made known occasionally, or rivalry between Algeria and Morocco, do little to change the long-established overall picture.

However, the lull just veils contradictory intra-regional processes, which, taken together, are quite capable of triggering another imbalance in the region. These processes can be described with several dichotomies, which have an impact on the intra-regional landscape that only intensifies over time.

Dichotomy 1: rich and poor nations

Imbalances in economic development per se are nothing new in the Middle East. However, their aggravation is leading to changes in the quality of the socio-political life. At a time when some countries are ready to embrace a new technological order, others, on the contrary, are confronted with overly simplified economic arrangements and the widespread occurrence of the most destructive forms of political and economic relations. In both cases, in addition to the economic transformation of societies, this brings about a specific social transformation of societies which will call for political changes (different ones in different countries) down the line. If in the case of deteriorating economies the key issue is about ensuring the functioning of at least basic institutions of statehood, the leading economies, on the contrary, may soon run into the need to expand the political regimes' social base and to form new mechanisms for co-opting their elites. In large countries such as Saudi Arabia, the fast pace of economic development is superimposed on the urbanisation processes and, subsequently, the transformation of society's tribal structure. The inevitable risks of mounting social tensions can be somewhat mitigated by high-quality governance and availability of sizable free financial resources owned by the elites. However, these risks are unlikely to be removed in full.

If it were not for the intra-country processes, the gap in economic development would have led to the formation of a centre-periphery regional subsystem within which economically and politically weak territories would be subsumed in the orbit of stronger economies. However, with the above challenges in mind, the leadership of these countries will strive to shield themselves from destructive external influences, which means weaker intra-regional ties.

Dichotomy 2: conflicts and conflict resolution

In the 2020s, the list of unresolved Middle Eastern conflicts expanded. In addition to the commonly mentioned Palestinian-Israeli and Western Saharan conflicts, it now includes the Yemeni, Libyan and Syrian conflicts. In all cases, we are witnessing a decrease in the intensity of armed confrontation and fading interest in it on the part of regional and global actors alike, replete with the total absence of clear prospects for a political settlement, failed or sterile mediation initiatives, the persistence of the root causes of the conflicts and newly arising flash points.

Syria is standing somewhat separately in this arrangement. Despite the dramatic situation in that country bedeviled by hyperinflation, impoverishment of large masses of the population, lack of uninterrupted power supply, and the fuel crisis, to mention a few, a dash of improved relations with a number of Arab countries, which Turkey may follow, could, in theory, create proper conditions for partial normalisation of the economic situation which would help Damascus make advances in its efforts to strengthen the sociopolitical system sooner or later. In Yemen and Libya, those prospects are nonexistent: many years of humanitarian disaster in Yemen and incompetent Libyan governments in the 2010s-2020s leave little chance for making any systematic improvements.

The inevitable formation of a habit for conflicts by external actors and societies experiencing them is among the biggest present dangers. This, in turn, results in a fading away of efforts to resolve them. The sad experience of Western Sahara and Palestine indicates that the situation can persist for decades and continue to have a destructive effect on the entire regional layout.

In addition to existing conflicts, the prerequisites for new ones are arising, primarily in Lebanon. The systemic crisis of nationhood, economic collapse and food shortages have sent about 3.2 million people in that country, that is, more than half, below the poverty line. The Palestinian and Syrian refugees, many of whom have come face-to-face with political violence on earlier occasions, have been hit particularly hard. Given the presence of the Syrian border and the uncontrolled spread of firearms in the Levant, the likelihood of radicalisation and the spread of terrorism is quite high.

Egypt, now in the grip of the deepest ever economic crisis in recent years, faces a less acute, but still a very challenging situation. The stability of state institutions, which is customary for that country, makes a conflict scenario here unlikely, but social destabilisation cannot be ruled out.

Algerian-Moroccan relations are another potential hotbed of tension. The countries have been rivals over the past several years, but their current relations are reminiscent of a new sub-regional Cold War, which may well degrade into a hot phase.

Dichotomy 3: authoritarianism and civil societies

Konstantin Truevtsev noted in his last monograph that “the Arab Spring and the ensuing regional conflicts in the Arab world clearly exposed the doom and fast approaching demise of the authoritarian political systems.”¹ In and of itself, this does not imply a democratic transition which has not taken place in full in any country of that region, and the underpinning theory is causing much skepticism. However, according to Truevtsev, it goes to show that the previous development model has run its course.

At first glance, the events of the past two years call into question the accuracy of the above opinion. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing developments have, on the contrary, created the prerequisites for the strengthening of authoritarian dynamics in the governance systems. In Algeria, the rise to power of Abdelmajid Tebboune failed to significantly transform the political system; in Tunisia, Kais Saied was making overt attempts to establish a one-man presidential rule in 2021-2022; in Egypt, the governance model that was formed in 2013 has been used to this day, and so on. Moreover, the strengthening of the right-wing political forces that is typical of the rest of the world and is manifested in the Middle East (such as an ultra-right government in Israel), would appear to create more prerequisites for this trend to expand. One gets the impression that the republican countries of the region are facing a choice of either rejecting democracy, or... also a rejection: falling prey to political turbulence which is likely to result in a collapsed statehood.

However, the formation of the “new authoritarianism” is aggravated by two aspects that prevent the region from moving forward according to the scenarios of the second half of the 20th century.

First, major social upgrade efforts undertaken in all countries of the region have already led to the formation of meaningful elements of civil society. The number of NGOs grew exponentially in that region in the 21st century. Even though they may exist in fewer numbers than in Europe – even by an order of magnitude – and the NGOs themselves are far from always being truly independent (many of them are funded from external sources or by their own governments), this is already enough to involve a significant portion of society in the sociopolitical process, a fact which puts forward new requirements for the social contract.

Second, generally the “new authoritarianism” does not justify itself ideologically in any way and cannot offer societies any tempting prospects for economic development in the way the political regimes of the 20th century used to do. In fact, the only thing they can offer is security, which, however, will still be a problem without major development prospects.

¹ Truevtsev K.M. Глобализация и арабский мир: до и после двух волн турбулентности. М.: Ин-т востоковедения РАН, 2020. С. 312.

The two above circumstances call into question the likelihood of an effective recovery of the authoritarian governance model in the medium term. Coupled with the aggravated social justice issues – in individual countries and globally – this creates new threats to the political development of the above countries.

Dichotomy 4: unity and particular nature of identities

For long years, it was believed that despite the lack of developed regional institutions, the low level of intra-regional trade and the enormous role of external actors, the Middle East remained highly integrated culturally and ideologically. However, the outcome of the previous decade casts doubt on this belief.

Indeed, the events of the Arab Spring of 2011 and protests in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria in 2019 showed that while the Arab countries shared the same communication space, this could not be said about their ideological or political space. Coupled with the sharp rise of the non-Arab countries of the region, the transformations of the 2010s have led to a series of rifts between the Arab countries, and all attempts to appeal to the idea of Arab unity failed since it was seen either as an attempt to revivify the long forgotten ideals of the 1950s, or as a more or less far-fetched anti-Iranian project.

The hopes of achieving unity on the basis of Islam fell through as well. Forces representing various currents of political Islam in most countries were integrated into national political systems (with the exception of Syria), but failed to prove their ability to establish effective long-term control over them. The activities of the most radical jihadist groups caused idiosyncrasy with regard to their projects in regional societies and led to the idea of political Islam losing much of its credibility.

Due to the challenging circumstances of the early 2020s, the countries of the region turned to country-specific nationalism strategies, thus, in fact, abandoning integration ideas. The course on nationalism coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which created conditions for state actors to be given more power, this time on a global scale, and there is every reason to believe that this will continue unabated in the medium term. The above challenges stemming from mounting economic imbalances, the impact of old conflicts, the emergence of new flash points and the attempts to strengthen authoritarian elements within the governance systems are bolstering this course.

Dichotomy 5: three troikas of leaders

The four above dichotomies make it possible to take a fresh look at regional leadership. For decades, the Middle East has existed without an unconditionally dominant centre of power, which made entire country groups claim this spot. However, their claims were invariably challenged by others.

So far, there have been two such groups.

The first group included Egypt, Syria and Iraq, which played a central role in the regional subsystem of relations in the 1950s and, to a varying degree, retained it until the 1990s. Their advancement to the forefront was underpinned not so much by the availability of highly developed governance systems or high levels of modernisation, but by their ability to come up with a national development project that would be seen by the entire Arab world as significant. Their geographic location made it possible for them to form an unusual regional architecture with a strong centre, weak periphery and frontier countries.

In the 1980s, though, the leadership positions of the three countries began to erode. The degradation of Iraq after the Iran-Iraq War and the First Gulf War, the decline in the foreign policy activities of Egypt and Syria, and the failure to come up with a new project to replace the Arab nationalism ideas that had lost their appeal and, to top it all, the US invasion of Iraq created a vacuum in the region that lasted some time.

After 2011, the vacuum was quickly filled by the second set of top three countries, namely, Iran, Israel and Turkey. Each of these countries could offer the Middle East an appealing image of a strong power, and Iran and Turkey could also offer success stories of political Islam. Their coming to the fore also led to the formation of a new regional architecture, this time with a strong periphery and a weak centre, which became home to an unimaginably fierce competition among them (conflicts in Syria and Iraq). The problem, however, was that these three countries were shackled by natural restrictions on the development of regional ambitions. None of them was Arab and all of them had a complicated track record of relations with the Arab world. Applying Turkish or Iranian governance models in the Arab soil proved impossible, and each of the three countries was hit by severe domestic political and (in the case of Turkey and Iran) economic difficulties in the 2020s.

This created a proper environment for a third trio – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar – to come to the fore. The three Arab monarchies boast financial and economic resources, are able to offer an appealing model of national development, and are free from the historical burden of colonialism and some sociopolitical challenges. Today, they are trying to assume a leading position and, therefore, reshape the region one more time.

Overall, the situation is quite alarming: the Middle East is overflowing with contradictions, ongoing and potential crises and conflicts, its future is vague, and the formation of a new regional leadership will entail another transformation of the regional subsystem. Add to that the fact that the place of the region in global politics is determined not only by the above intra-regional processes, but also by the impact of the external factors on the region.

External factors: quiet revolutions

The most notable external factors that may have a role to play in changing this region's place in international politics in the medium term may have to do with transforming the global economy rather than politics. New circumstances on the oil and gas market, food supply and global transport and supply lines stand out among them.

The hydrocarbon market: new outlines of the same old reality

The international situation in 2022 has prompted significant changes on the global hydrocarbon market. As expected, the role of OPEC+ has strengthened, and, accordingly, the political influence of key oil exporting countries in regulating the global oil and gas market has amplified. This primarily concerns the Middle Eastern countries, which play leading roles in OPEC and have demonstrated their ability to withstand the political pressure of the United States, which insisted on increasing oil production contrary to the decisions of OPEC+.

According to the cartel's forecast¹ (December 2022), global oil and gas consumption will increase until 2045, and OPEC's share in global oil supply will rise from 33 percent in 2021 to 39 percent in 2045. Given that in 2022, of all the countries of the cartel, only Saudi Arabia and the UAE possessed significant available oil production capacities, the growing role of the GCC countries on the global oil and gas market can be considered at least a medium-term trend.

The repartition of this market began in 2022. With Russia reorienting its business towards Asian importers, the role of the Middle Eastern countries in Europe has increased. Thus, according to some estimates, Saudi oil supplies to Europe through the Egyptian SuMed pipeline and the Saudi Arabia ports reached an average of 798,000 barrels/day in October-November 2022, which is 17 percent higher than in January-February 2022 with 663,000 barrels/day.²

Speaking of gas, European countries are planning to replace Russian gas with LNG supplies from Qatar, the United States and Australia. Even though Qatari LNG supplies covered no more than 5 percent of Europe's needs in 2022, and in February 2022 the emirate's Minister of State for Energy Affairs Saad Al Kaabi said that the country was not in a position to replace Russia in terms of gas supplies to Europe, as soon as in October 2022 he promised³ to supply Europe steadily with 12-15 million tonnes of natural gas. Technically, this change of approach is connected with Qatar's plans

¹ OPEC Bulletin. 1-12. 2022. C. 21.

² 'Trading places': Moscow muscles in on Saudi Arabia's oil sales to Asia // Middle East Eye. 06.12.2022. URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/trading-places-moscow-muscles-saudi-arabias-oil-sales-asia>

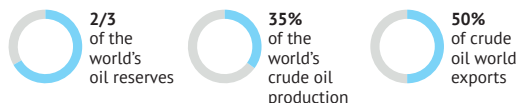
³ Cm.: Energy Intelligence Forum. URL: https://twitter.com/EI_Forum?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor

OPEC+

Members of OPEC

- | | | |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 Algeria | 6 Iraq | 11 Nigeria |
| 2 Angola | 7 Republic of the Congo | 12 Saudi Arabia |
| 3 Venezuela | 8 Kuwait | 13 Equatorial Guinea |
| 4 Gabon | 9 Libya | |
| 5 Iran | 10 UAE | |

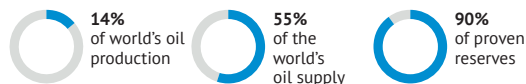
OPEC controls



Members of OPEC+

- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| 1 Azerbaijan | 6 Mexico |
| 2 Bahrain | 7 Oman |
| 3 Brunei | 8 Russia |
| 4 Kazakhstan | 9 Sudan |
| 5 Malaysia | 10 South Sudan |

OPEC+ controls



OPEC+ in October 2022 decided to reduce the oil production quota by 2 million barrels per day, extended the deal to 2023 and now meets not monthly, but every six months



OPEC+ is an expanded format of OPEC, formed in November 2016



On February 1, 2023, the energy ministers of the OPEC+ member countries, following a meeting of the monitoring committee, did not recommend that the alliance alter the current level of oil production. The delegates reaffirmed their commitment to the production plan, which was agreed to on October 5, 2022, the press service of the organization said. The next meeting of the monitoring committee will take place on April 3



Analysts at Goldman Sachs Group expect global oil demand to rise to 2.7 million barrels per day in 2023, given population growth in Asia and demand in China



Other important factors affecting oil prices are OPEC+ production cuts and measures to limit the price of Russian oil, which, according to Deloitte, could lead to disruptions in global supplies

Sources: www.interfax.ru, pronpz.ru, www.forbes.com, www.naturalgasintel.com

to become the world's largest LNG supplier by way of expanding the LNG production at the North field from 77 to 126 million tonnes per year.¹

Algeria and, in the future, Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan) are other important gas suppliers. However, European consumers' relations with the Algerian suppliers are marred by occasionally diametrically opposite approaches to a number of issues, including the Western Sahara conflict, security in the Maghreb, the situation in the Sahel, and the legacy of colonialism, to name a few. Algeria is leaning towards using energy to leverage its northern partners, while not only maintaining, but also deepening close cooperation with Russia.

The situation has five key implications:

1. Both at the global and regional levels in the Middle East, the polarisation between oil exporters and oil importers is intensifying, and the latter are becoming increasingly dependent.
2. Energy ties between Middle Eastern suppliers and European consumers are getting stronger. In a number of cases, energy interaction relies on political considerations.

THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA IN THE SYSTEM OF GLOBAL OIL AND GAS RELATIONS

— Gas pipeline — Oil pipeline



Source: World Oil Map 2021

¹ Катар планирует стать крупнейшим продавцом СПГ в мире // РИА Новости. 05.10.2022. URL: <https://ria.ru/20221005/gaz-1821713108.html>

3. As Russia is reorienting its supplies towards Asian markets, the role of the Arab suppliers in Asia may decrease, which, in turn, will cause downward pressure on the prices for Arab oil in Asia. However, since oil consumption is projected to grow in countries outside the OECD in the future, and in the OECD countries the decline in oil consumption is estimated at over 10 million barrels per day in 2021–2045, the issue should be about diversifying consumers of Arab energy.
4. The latter ensures the strengthening of the Arab exporters' economic sovereignty, which is reflected, among other things, in the transition to settlements in national currencies.
5. The oil policy coordination within OPEC+ is likely to become more complex.

Food security and the politics of survival

At a time when the transformation of the energy market entails the strengthening of the global role and agency of a number of Middle Eastern countries (primarily, the GCC and Algeria), the situation with food supplies, on the contrary, contributes to the deepening of the crisis and the growing dependence of regional development on external factors.

On the one hand, according to Rosselkhoz nadzor,¹ Russian grain exports have been 3 percent higher since the beginning of 2022 than in 2021, with the Middle Eastern countries accounting for 39 percent of shipments and African countries for 20 percent. On the other hand, the food shocks of 2022 caused by the Ukraine conflict, which broke out amid a steady increase in food prices that had been going on since the spring of 2020,² has led to a severe aggravation of the situation in a number of Middle Eastern countries.

Almost all of them are heavily dependent on food imports. The level of dependence reaches 95–100 percent in the GCC monarchies, 71 percent in Algeria, 66 percent in Tunisia, 57 percent in Morocco, and 48 percent in Egypt.³ Russia and Ukraine have provided the bulk of supplies to these countries in recent years. Thus, Egypt, which is the largest Middle Eastern country with a population of 100 million, buys 35 percent of its cereals from Russia and 25 percent from Ukraine. The two countries meet Egypt's demand for wheat by 60 and 25 percent, respectively.

Only rich countries have sufficient resources to ensure uninterrupted supplies amid the crisis. The situation in poor countries is getting worse. So, the price of bread began to rise in Tunisia and Morocco in the summer of 2022. In the case

¹ Итоги 2022: Экспорт зерна, государственный мониторинг качества, борьба с недостоверным декларированием // Россельхознадзор. 29.12.2022. URL: <https://fsvps.gov.ru/ru/tags/eksport-zerna>

² Commodity Food Price Index Monthly Price – Index Number // IndexMundi. URL: <https://www.indexmundi.com/commodities/?commodity=food-price-index&months=60>

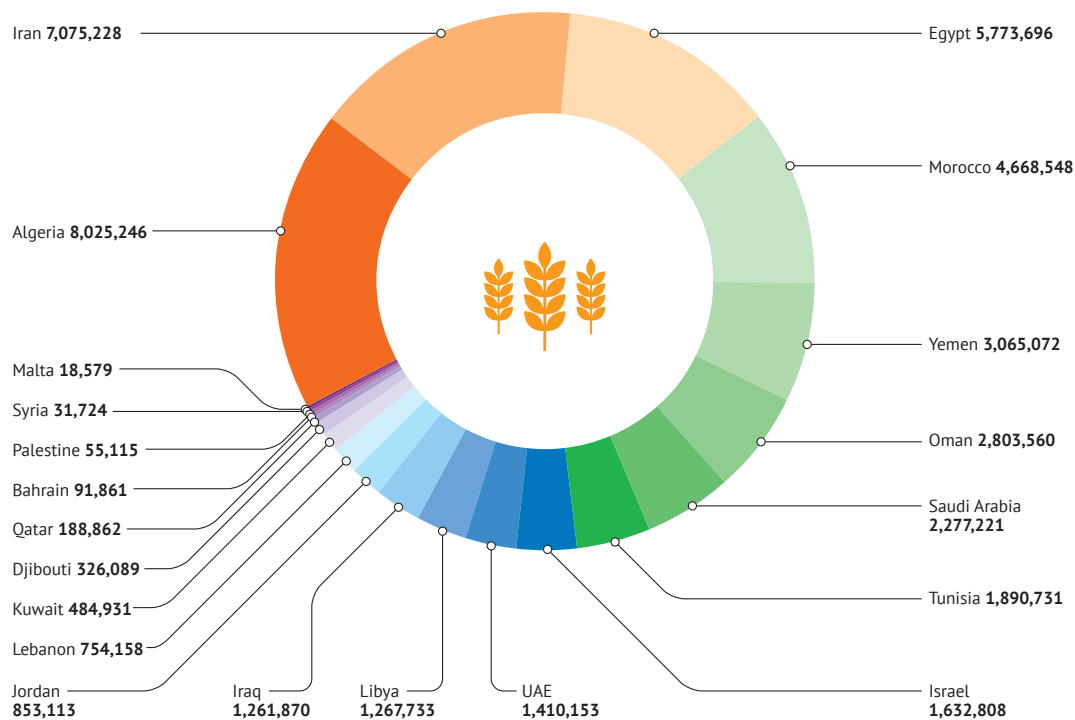
³ Арабский Восток в лабиринте социально-экономических проблем: коллективная монография / Отв. ред. А. О. Филоник. М.: ИВРАН. 2022. 226 с.

of Tunisia, this coincided with a drop in the tourist flow from Russia and Ukraine and clear signs of an internal political crisis.

Yemen, Lebanon and Syria are in an extremely vulnerable, if not dismal situation. While Syria is still able to cover its needs for food by 30 percent, Lebanon and Yemen do not have food or financial resources for this. Yemen is facing a very real threat of mass starvation: in 2022, 17.4 million people were already struggling to put food on the table, while 5.6 million were in a state of food emergency.¹

The grain deal between Turkey, Russia, the UN and Ukraine, which was concluded in July 2022 and renewed on November 17 for 120 days, seemed to have smoothed out the sharp peaks of the crisis and partially stabilised global grain prices, but it was unable to resolve the problem in full.

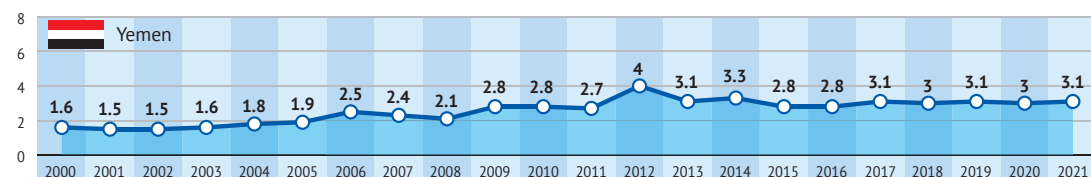
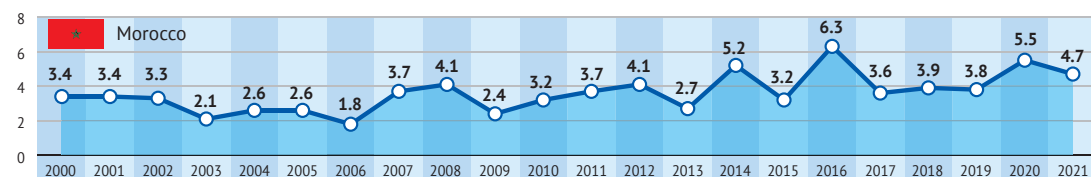
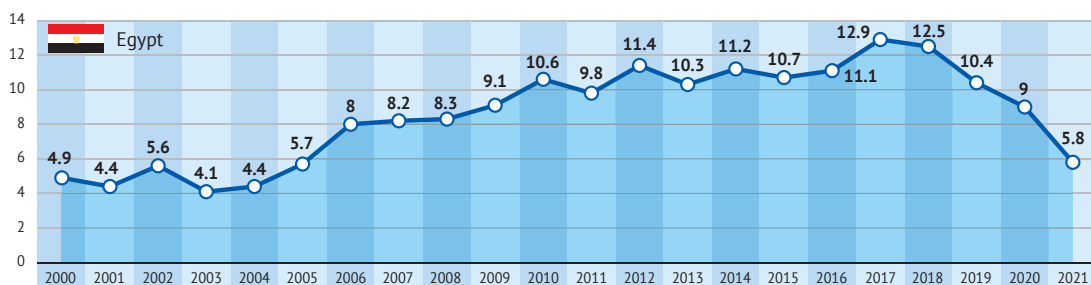
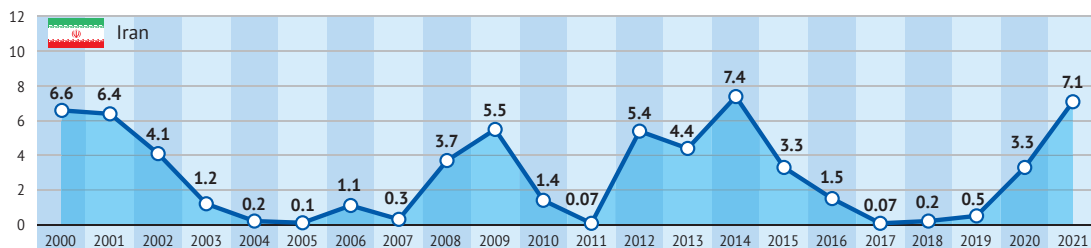
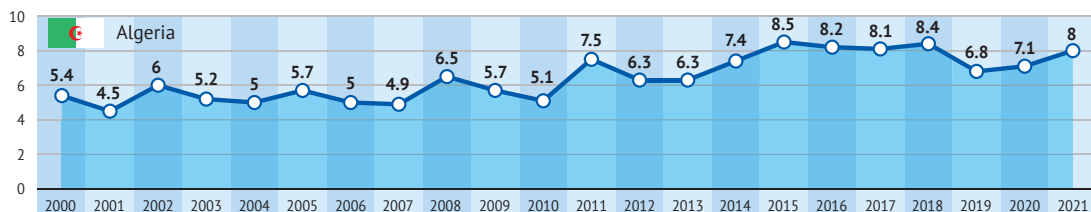
WHEAT IMPORT VOLUMES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, TONNES



Source: FAOSTAT

¹ Hunger Hotspots. FAO-WFP early warnings on acute food insecurity June to September. 2022 Outlook / FAO. Rome. 2022.

WHEAT IMPORT VOLUMES IN THE TOP 5 IMPORTERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA, MILLION TONS



Source: FAOSTAT

By the end of the first period, more than 50 percent of the 10 million tonnes of grain shipped under the deal went to Spain, Turkey, China, Italy and the Netherlands, while the countries that are most in need, such as Ethiopia, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, Lebanon, Kenya and Somalia got only 5 percent of the shipment.¹ Ukraine has cut its wheat exports and focused on expensive supplies of corn and sunflower oil to the EU and East Asia.

The political circumstances are only partly to blame for the ongoing situation. The fact that, overall, the food crisis is of a structural macroeconomic nature, and food shortages in the least developed countries of Asia and Africa stem mostly from the lack of money to pay for it, cannot be ignored.

The erratic supplies of Russian fertilisers are another negative factor. According to FAO, fertiliser exports fell by 10 percent in early January. Russia has stepped up its fertiliser supplies to Turkey, India, and Vietnam. The Maghreb countries were the first to sense the shortage of supplies with Morocco finding itself in a particularly vulnerable position.

Partial reorientation of the Middle Eastern importers to new food suppliers came as an aftermath of the crisis. Algeria, which used to buy Russian wheat in small quantities, practically turned down European supplies this year and switched to the Russian market. In addition, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and Sudan increased their purchases of Russian grain. Egypt, which used to be one of the main grain importers, began to switch to payments in rubles, while buying grain in the EU countries. Lebanon, which earlier bought up to 60 percent of its grain from Ukraine, is now forced to turn to other suppliers, including Russia.

There are four main implications for the Middle East:

1. The economic polarisation of the countries of the region begins to be projected directly onto food, hence, sociopolitical security. Only wealthy countries have a sufficient set of economic tools to stave off new threats. The gap between the GCC countries, Israel, Iran and Turkey and the most vulnerable economies in the region is widening.
2. As in the case of energy, the role of political factors in regulating the food market is growing. This helps strengthen the position of Turkey, as well as, albeit to a lesser extent, the position of the countries that are capable of ensuring their own food security.
3. In the medium and long term, the two previous implications will lead to an increase in systemic dependence of food importers on food exporters.
4. In the countries that are most vulnerable in terms of food security, the risks of social destabilisation are skyrocketing.

¹ According to I.V. Deryugina, this figure is even less than 2 percent for the most vulnerable MENA economies. Deryugina I.V. Food security in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa // Economics and Entrepreneurship. No. 8 (145). 2022. pp.116-120

New transport and logistics system: ghostly hopes

If the effect of the transformation of the oil and gas and food markets is mainly short – or medium-term, the revolutionary changes in the global transport and logistics system have a more lasting and systemic impact.

Interestingly, in the 1970s, transatlantic traffic accounted for 80 percent of the global freight traffic, whereas today trade links of China, the Middle East and Africa already account for more than half of the international trade.

In the short term, air traffic is the most important area of logistics for the Middle East, and maritime transport will be named as such in the long term.

Sanctions and counter-sanctions on air travel imposed by the West and Russia have triggered the demand for alternative routes and airlines. There has been a sharp increase in the importance of Istanbul and Dubai as world-class aviation hubs, as well as in the status of the national airlines operated by Turkey and the GCC countries.

With regard to sea freight, for a long time, the Suez Canal will remain the main sea route for 25 percent of the world's goods traffic from Europe to South, Southeast and East Asia. The importance of the canal is expected to increase to 33 percent of global goods traffic in the short to medium term. This boosts the importance of Egypt in international politics in general and for the Western countries, in particular.

In the context of ongoing developments, land routes are taking on a new role as well. The most important of them pass through Russia and Central and South Asia. At the same time there are untapped opportunities for developing road and rail networks in the Middle East. Two large ports are being constructed in northern and southern Israel, and a railway is being built to connect them. Clearly, a hundred-year-old project will get implemented, and railways will go directly from the continent to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea. Israel has the potential to become an important railway hub.

Despite the difficult situation in Syria and the stalling of the project to connect the Syrian railway network with the Iranian railway, there are still prospects in this area as well. If the North-South transport corridor is opened, it may well be linked up with the transport hubs in the Persian Gulf, on the one hand, and the Mediterranean coast (across Iraq and Syria), on the other hand. This leads, **first**, to a strengthening of the positions of Iran, Iraq and Syria in the global transport infrastructure and, **second**, to at least partial involvement of the Middle East in the Eurasian space.

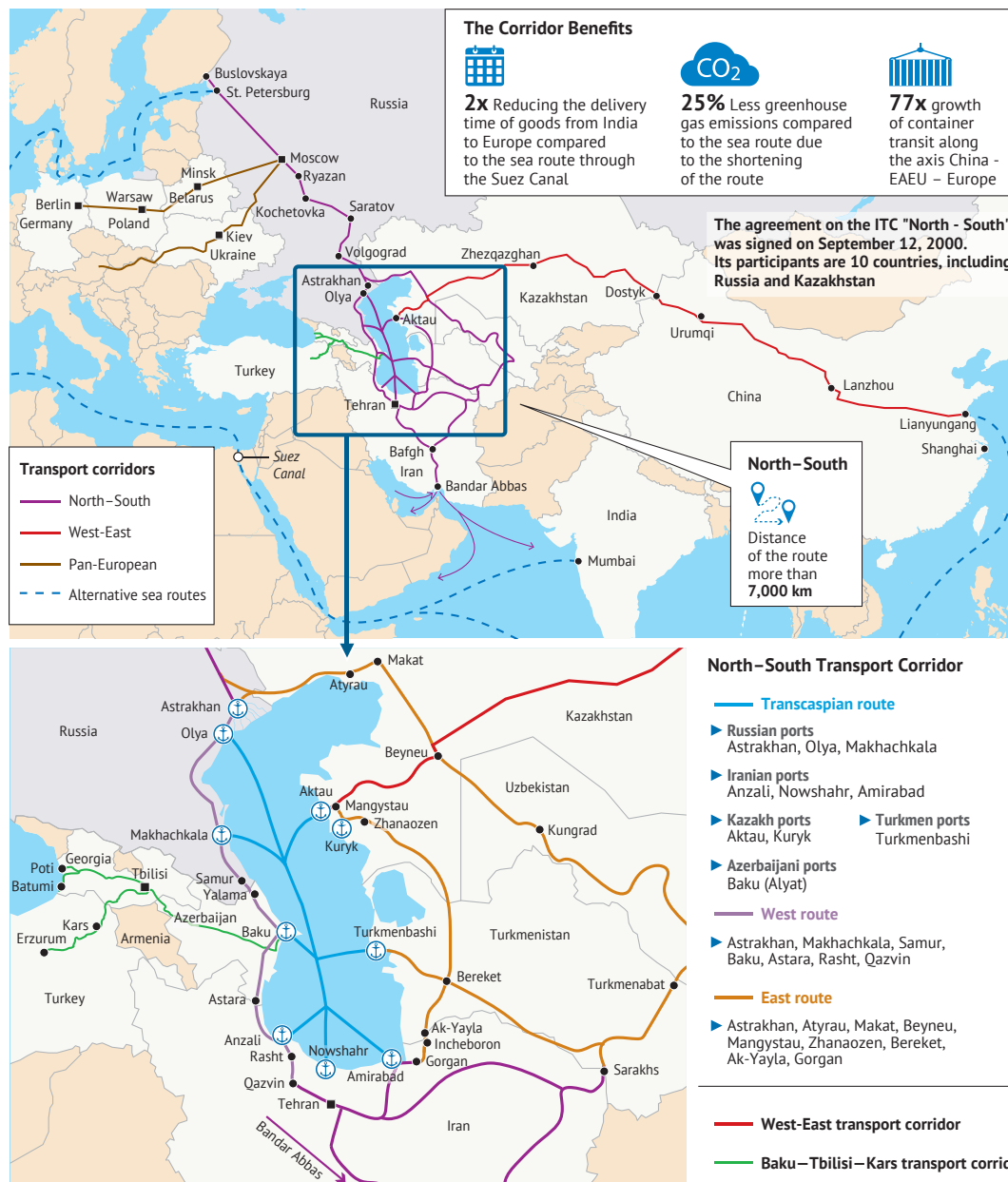
A trans-African railway, with access to the Mediterranean Sea through the territory of Algeria, could be built in the Maghreb, which has for a long time remained on the fringes of international transport networks.

All of this has the following implications:

1. In the short and medium term, the transport and logistics chains will shift to the South, which will boost the importance of the Middle East in global trade. In the long term, after the situation in Ukraine gets resolved and relations between Russia and the West are normalised, traffic flows may shift to the North again.

INTERNATIONAL NORTH-SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDOR

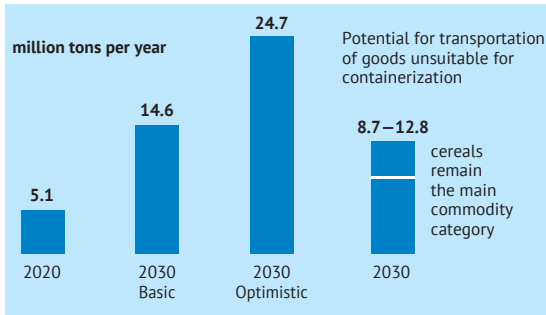
The North-South Multimodal International Transport Corridor (ITC) connects the northwestern part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Scandinavian countries with the states of Central Asia (CA), the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean



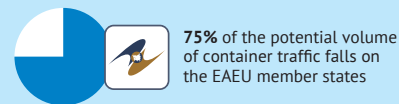
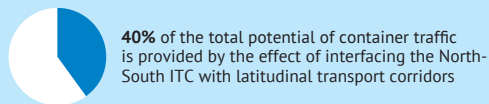
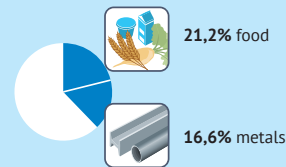
Sources: Russian Railways, open sources.

INTERNATIONAL NORTH–SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDOR

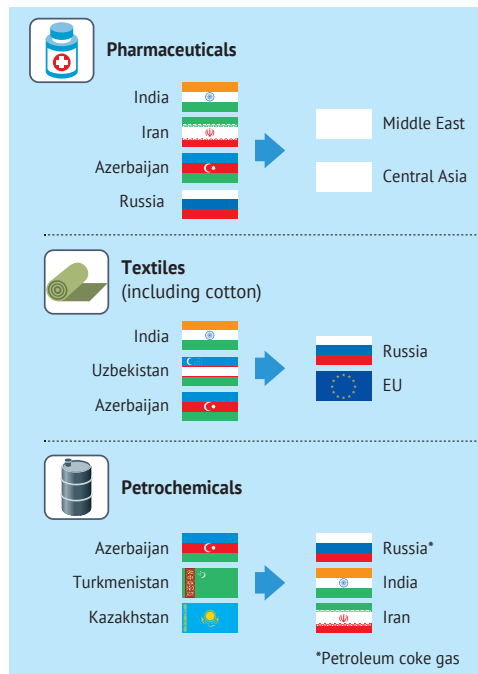
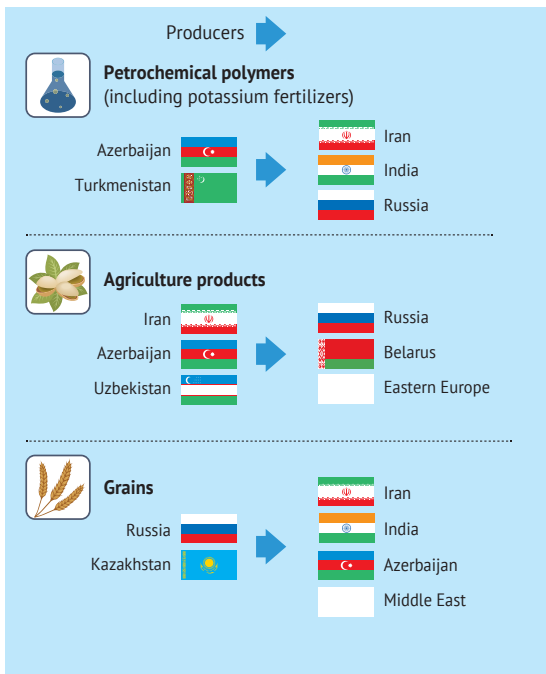
Assessment of the of cargo transportation potential by 2030



325–662 thousand TEUs
the potential of container traffic



Main Goods to Be Transported Along North-South Corridor



Sources: Russian Railways, open sources

2. The intensification of traffic along the southern routes means that maritime transport will have a stronger role to play which, in turn, indicates, first, an increase in the critical importance of maintaining security in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, and second, the rising influence of the countries that control these waters, primarily, Iran, GCC countries and Egypt. Settling the conflict in Yemen is thus becoming particularly important.
3. Concurrently, the role of the Middle Eastern hubs in air transport is becoming stronger. Clearly, Turkey and the UAE will benefit from it.
4. Finally, in the long run, the transformation of the global transport infrastructure could, on the one hand, allow a number of Middle Eastern countries to strengthen their position in the international arena and, on the other hand, will contribute to the disintegration of the MENA region, with the inclusion of its eastern part in the Eurasian space, and its western part in the Mediterranean space.

The three above external factors do not affect the international position of different Middle Eastern countries in equal proportions. There is a group of countries that is already increasing its influence in international politics and is capable of continuing to do so; there's a group that has a significant potential for exerting influence, but is unable to do so due to a variety of limiting circumstances; and there is a group of countries whose dependence on external circumstances is likely to either remain unchanged or to increase. In all three instances, changes in the positions of the countries from any particular group in the international arena will be determined not only and not so much by external circumstances, but rather by internal circumstances.

The above external factors have led to an expansion of the Middle Eastern countries' economic ties. Some of them, like Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, saw their economic ties with Eurasia expand. Other Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Algeria, have seen their economic ties improve with the Western countries as a corollary of the Middle Eastern oil and gas exporters' increased role on the European markets. Still others, like Turkey, UAE and Egypt saw their economic ties improve due to their favourable location on the logistics routes connecting the East to the West. Some of them, like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, became more dependent on the supply of agricultural products from Europe and the United States.

The countries that are simultaneously part of the Western, the Eurasian and the Asian economic and political spaces, such as the GCC countries, Iran or Turkey enjoy the most favourable arrangement. Eventually, this may lead to the strengthening of their economic sovereignty, which is already happening, for example, with the GCC countries, whose growing economic independence has so far led to only lim-

ited political expression, but has nevertheless contributed to an erosion of the global economic system pegged to the US dollar and to the formation of a global economic polycentricity.

Let's return to the question posed at the very beginning. If a polycentric world does emerge, what place will the Middle East and North Africa have in it? Will the region be able to claim the role of the global political system's centre? Or will it become a peripheral region of his system? Or, perhaps it will become – in whole or in part – a sphere of influence of other centres?

There are today no simple answers to these questions. But the above external and internal factors of regional development make it possible to make some assumptions.

Scenario #1

Under the first scenario, the Middle East and North Africa will become an independent centre since these countries represent one geographical region and still share historical and cultural commonality and elements of shared identity.

However, the above trend towards country-specific nationalism undercuts the importance of this unifying principle. The absence of a dominant power in this vast area, the growing internal fragmentation and multiple development imbalances combined with the military-political weakness of the Middle Eastern countries (compared to other centres of power) come to the fore as serious arguments against this scenario.

If it does materialise though, Russia will need to adjust its Middle Eastern policy. In recent decades, it was based on Moscow's ability to "be friends with everyone" and to build positive relations with a variety of regional actors. In the new circumstances, when formulating goals, it will be necessary to take into account the global aspirations of the key Middle Eastern players and the new balances of interests in Eurasia.

Scenario #2

The diametrically opposite option includes transforming the entire space "from the Ocean to the Gulf" into a vast peripheral space of global politics. This option is supported not only by existing and looming conflicts, but also by the region's high dependence on external players who, amid the ongoing efforts to form a new international order, are unlikely to be ready to take responsibility for the Middle East and thus repeat the experience of the 20th century.

However, the availability of the points of growth, that is the countries that are not only advancing strong claims for regional leadership, but are also capable of playing a meaningful global role coupled with the important part that the Middle East continues to play in global energy supplies and the global transport and logistics routes is making it unlikely that this scenario will ever come to fruition.

In addition, this scenario appears to be vastly disadvantageous to almost all centres of international politics, including Russia and Europe, for which the expansion of conflict to the south of their borders will mean the emergence of new major threats. Under the current circumstances, it is hardly possible to expect productive interaction on security matters in the Middle East between Russia and the West, but the parties can still make efforts not to project their current confrontation onto the region.

Scenario #3

As we take up the third option for the unfolding of events, let's consider a scenario where certain parts of the Middle East and North Africa are adjacent to other global political centres, such as European (Maghrib) or Eurasian (Mashriq), and a local independent centre of power takes hold in the Persian Gulf region. This scenario could be facilitated by the emerging transport and logistics system, the alteration of global economic ties, the factors of intra-regional weakness and the availability of isolated points of growth. The cultural and religious, as well as political unity could play an important role in building adjunction in a polycentric world.

In theory, once implemented, this scenario should help strengthen Europe and Eurasia and speed up the development of certain parts of the Middle East and North Africa.

In principle, the threat here is the same as in the previous scenario, and the Russia-West confrontation could spread to the Middle East, which would aggravate the existing conflict potential there. If Maghreb connects with Europe and Mashriq connects with Eurasia in a more or less smooth manner, the issue of revising the foundations of inter-civilisational interaction already within the two new centres of international politics will arise. This, however, is a matter of a relatively distant and very hypothetical future. So far, the players are busy addressing completely different concerns.

Given the above scenarios that may unfold in the Middle Eastern region and the existing conflict-prone nature of Russia's relations with the West, Russia's Middle Eastern policy would benefit from becoming more adaptive and flexible.

Gaza. Yemen. Epicentres of Pain. Feelings, Myths, and Memories in the Middle East

February 2024

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Many developments that significantly impacted the destinies of the regional players, non-regional actors, and many people around the world have unfolded during the year that followed the publication of our paper titled “The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World” (February 2023).¹ Many of these developments appeared to continue the positive trends that we saw a year or two earlier. Saudi Arabia–Iran relations were officially normalised. Syria’s membership in the Arab League was reinstated. Egypt, Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia joined BRICS. Tensions continued to de-escalate in Yemen, with official visits exchanged between Sanaa and Riyadh in April and September 2023. The maritime and aerial blockade eased up, commercial activities at Yemeni ports picked up pace, and air service with Sanaa was partially restored.

However, the situation had drastically changed by the end of the year. The long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict re-emerged on the regional and global agenda and became the focal point of all regional conflicts in a matter of days. This fact shouldn’t have come as a surprise to analysts, because the conditions for this have always been there. Nevertheless, only some of them, including the authors of this paper, argued in recent years that this knot of contradictions held a central place in the inventory of Middle East regional conflicts.

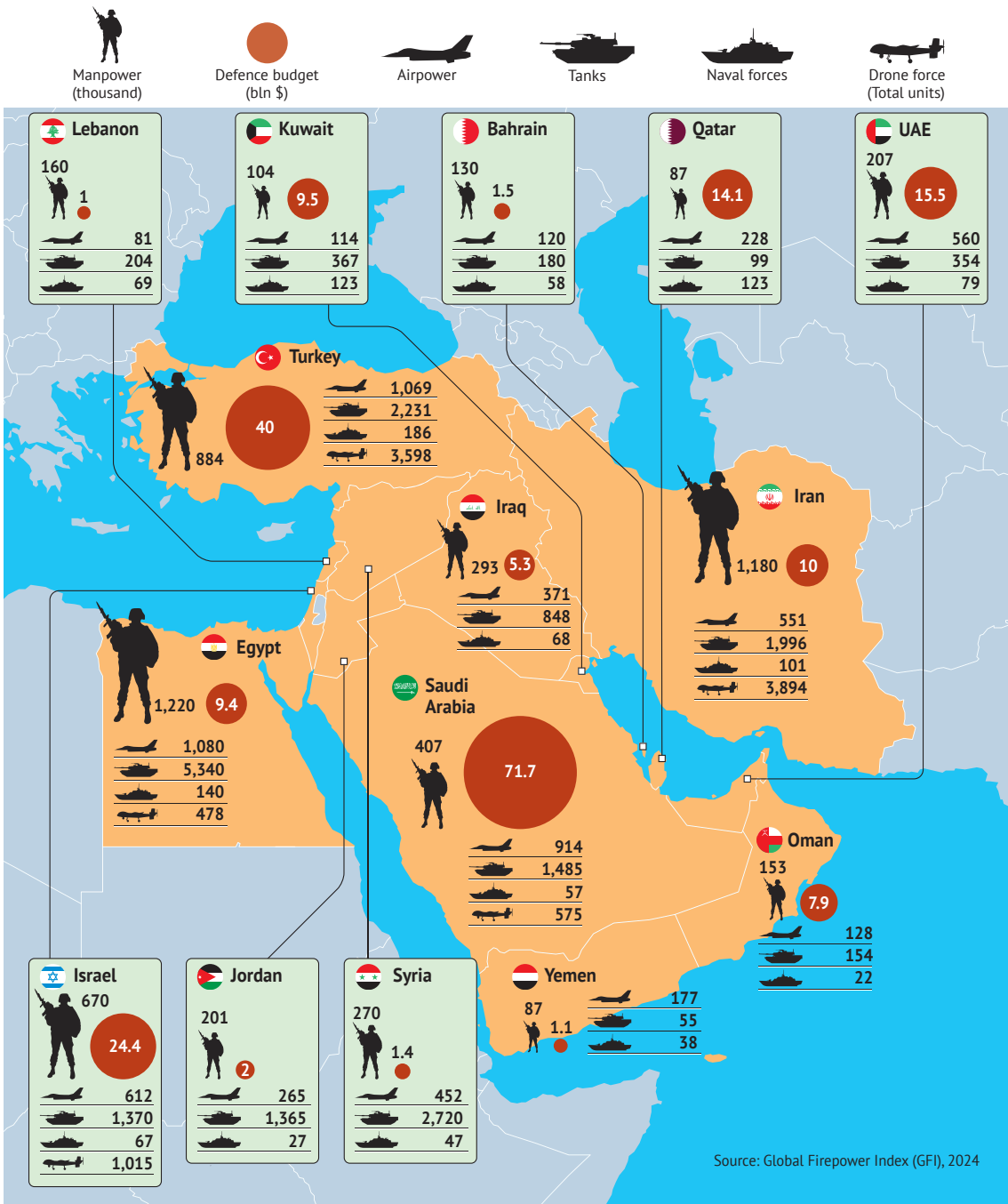
Epicentres of Pain

The new role of the Gaza Strip

In the emerging multipolar world order which we wrote about a year ago, the re-emergence of the conflict that was somewhat forgotten by the global and even many regional leaders as a major event did not come as a shock to international politics. However, the fact that Gaza became the focal point of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exacerbated by high levels of violence, a horrifying human death toll and destruction, and a full-scale humanitarian disaster caught the world off guard. Even the most insightful Western analysts acknowledge the fact that since Israel had subjected this densely populated enclave, with 2.3 million people, to air, sea, and land blockade for two decades, it was considered almost a non-entity in the regional balance of power, and the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), which was in a feud with the Fatah movement ruling the West Bank, was seen as a relatively insignificant Islamist force.

¹ Naumkin V., Kuznetsov V. The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World. Valdai Discussion Club Report 20.02.2023. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/the-middle-east-and-the-future-of-polycentric-world/>

MILITARY CAPABILITIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST COUNTRIES



The war has drastically changed the perception of the situation. The events following Hamas's attack on Israel showed the volatility of the countries' positions, sympathies, and antipathies under the influence of changing circumstances. On October 7, 2023, and in the first few days that followed the invasion, Hamas's unprecedented cruelty, which included killings and hostage-taking of civilians, caused not only indignation in Israel as well as in friendly states but also condemnation from some in the Arab countries. However, since the beginning of Israel's retaliatory and significantly more cruel punitive military operation, support shifted in favour of the Palestinians.

To cite an example, we can look at changes in opinions and sympathies towards the countries in the region as well as global powers, from among the people of Tunisia which is a relatively neutral Arab country. According to surveys conducted by the Arab Barometer pollster and its local partner *One to One for Research and Polling*, before October 7, only 24 percent of respondents considered the efforts to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the most important aspect of US foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. At the height of the hostilities in Gaza, this figure rose to 59 percent. Before October 7, 40 percent of Tunisians thought positively about the United States, while 56 percent held an unfavourable opinion about it. With hostilities underway in Gaza, the number of the people holding unfavourable views grew to 87 percent, with only 10 percent holding a positive view of the United States.

Responding to a question about preferred ways of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before October 7, 66 percent of surveyed Tunisians spoke in favour of the two-state solution within the borders of June 4, 1967; 18 percent supported the creation of a single state or a confederation with equal rights for all; and 6 percent favoured other alternatives, most of which implied armed resistance to Israeli occupation (including the possible elimination of the state of Israel).

During the height of the military operation in Gaza, only 50 percent of Tunisians supported a two-state solution, 11 percent favoured a single state or a confederation, while 36 percent supported other alternatives, with the majority favouring armed resistance against Israel.¹

Clearly, if the Tunisians hold these views, the sentiments among Arabs in countries with large populations of Palestinian refugees are much more radical, and changes are more dramatic as well. The overwhelming hatred among Arabs, however, does not necessarily mean that the ruling elites are willing to risk peace and prosperity in their countries by siding with Hamas and joining the fight. The leaders are well aware of the potential consequences. (The Yemeni movement Ansarallah, or the Houthis, is an exception; see below.) The tradi-

¹ Robbins M., Roche M., Jamal A.A., Al-Shami S., Tessler M. How the Israel-Hamas War in Gaza Is Changing Arab Views // Foreign Affairs. 14.12.2023. URL: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/how-the-israel-hamas-war-in-gaza-is-changing-arab-views-2023-12-14.pdf>

tionally unfavourable attitude outside the “axis of resistance” towards Hamas, which is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood¹, also plays a role. However, overall, the perception of them has improved, and a significant number of Arabs now view them as martyrs dying for a just cause.

By mid-January 2024, when this paper was written, the death toll from Israeli bombings in Gaza, according to the local Healthcare Ministry, had exceeded 24,000, and the number of injured reached 60,000, with the figures continuing to grow. According to Arab journalists, northern Gaza has become the world’s largest children’s graveyard.

Rejecting the UN Security Council’s agreed-upon resolution for a settlement through the creation of an independent Palestinian state (within the borders of June 4, 1967, and with the capital in East Jerusalem), which would coexist with Israel, the government led by Benjamin Netanyahu is pushing the problem into a dead end. Flooding Israel with US – and UK-made weapons is doing nothing but prolonging the bloodshed. The continuing attempts to resolve the Gaza conflict by force are detrimental to the coexistence of the two peoples going forward.

However, issues exist on the Palestinian side as well, with inadequate consolidation of political forces being one of the most significant problems. Even the unity of Hamas is questionable: the diversity of players within the movement, the complexity of its historical background with its twists and turns, the dispersed distribution of leadership influenced by various countries and political forces – all contribute to a lack of cohesion within its ranks. The unity of the entire Palestinian resistance movement is out of the question. Attempts by Russia and Egypt to facilitate reconciliation between factions within the movement have failed due to the uncompromising positions of the various fronts and organisations, including Hamas and the Islamic Jihad.² During meetings in Moscow, their leaders continued to reject the project supported by the majority of Palestinians and the international community, including Russia, for the creation of an independent Palestinian state on a portion of Palestinian territory, which would imply recognition of the legitimacy of the state of Israel.

To understand the new role of the Gaza Strip in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one must take a closer look at the history of the enclave. For those who are familiar with the history of Palestine, the elevation of Gaza to the forefront of the Palestinian national movement’s strategic plan, or the victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections, shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Fierce strife between Hamas and Fatah, during which about a hundred people were killed, led to Hamas gaining control of the Gaza Strip in 2007. According to well-known French diplomat and researcher Jean-Pierre Filiu, “for a territory with a 4,000-year history,

¹ Banned in Russia.

² Banned in Russia.

the last 16 years have been an anomaly; Gaza has almost always been a key part of the political dynamics in the region... Since the British mandate in the early 20th century, the territory has been at the centre of Palestinian nationalism.” This is why, according to Filiu¹, restoring Gaza after such a devastating war will be a challenge unless its strategic position is taken into account. The enclave is unlikely to ever be demilitarised without lifting the blockade and achieving successful economic development. The French analyst came up with one more unexpected conclusion: “The United States and its allies should recognise that Gaza must become a *central part* (italicised by the authors of this paper) of the solution to the Palestinian struggle.”

The memory

Without overloading this paper with a historical recountal, we will provide a few historical facts that define the identity of Gaza residents and, more broadly, all Palestinians. According to our Palestinian partners, of the 2.3 million people in the Gaza Strip, approximately 1.5 million are indigenous people, while the rest are Palestinian refugees who live in camps. In 1997, refugees and their offspring accounted for 51.8 percent of the population of that territory. In addition to Muslims, Gaza had a small, about 3,500 people, Christian community of various denominations, predominantly Orthodox Christians. Almost all of their ancient churches have been destroyed as a result of Israel’s bombings.

In 2017, the largest Palestinian city of Gaza was home to 590,481 people. It had one of the world’s highest population growth rates. By 2017, the population density was 9,982.69 people per square kilometre (compared to 10,725.4 people per square kilometre in New York City).

The people of Gaza take pride in their city being one of the oldest cities on Earth. The Canaanite settlement was founded around 3,000 B.C. and was under control of the ancient Egyptians. The city was located on a strategic route connecting Egypt with the Levant and was first mentioned in Egyptian sources in the 15th century B.C. It became one of the five well-known cities that formed the Philistine Pentapolis (five cities) in the 12th century B.C., alongside Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath that are now part of Israel. Constant conflicts between the Philistines and Jewish tribes were part of local life. Gaza attracted its neighbours with its advantageous geostrategic location, and was a flourishing oasis with a cool climate. It was often invaded by the Assyrians. At some point, it was ruled by Babylon and then fell into the hands of the Persians under King Cyrus the Great in the mid-6th century B.C. It is mentioned several times in the Bible. The most famous mention is associated with Samson being

¹ Filiu J.-P. Why Gaza Matters // Foreign Affairs. January 1, 2024. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-gaza-matters>

placed in a Gaza prison after Delilah cut his miraculous hair off while he slept (Judges 16).

In 332 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered Gaza. The city surrendered after a hundred days of siege by his army that was headed to Egypt. As a punishment for the fierce resistance, Alexander, who had been wounded during the assault, killed almost all of the men and sold the women and children into slavery. During this short war, both sides, just like Hamas today, fortified their positions by digging tunnels and passages in the soft soil beneath the city.

Christianity came to Gaza with Philip the Apostle and his sermons (see Acts 8:39). A bishopric was established, and the city became a major centre of not only intellectual and artistic life (renowned rhetoricians, philosophers, and poets worked there) but also religious life for all three Abrahamic religions. In 407 A.D., the Christian bishop of Gaza, Porphyrius, built a church on the ruins of the main pagan temple of Zeus, and in 508 A.D., a massive five-story synagogue was erected. Just a few years later, one of the ancestors of the Prophet Muhammad, Hashim ibn Abd al-Manaf, visited the city. He died there in 525 A.D. In memory of this, in the 7th century, when Muslim armies took the city, they began to call it Gaza Hashim, and in the 19th century the Ottomans built the Hashim Mosque on the site of the mausoleum.

Gaza's golden age came during the rule of the Turkish Mamelukes. Many mosques, palaces, and libraries were built, and the city of Khan Yunis was built around the caravanserai in southern Gaza, which has been subjected to intense bombings in our time.

Notably, Gaza was conquered again in 1517, this time by the Ottoman Turks, who did not destroy anything, nor did they kill anyone. In 1799, Napoleon's army was there during its invasion of Egypt. Back then, economically thriving Gaza still enjoyed high standards of living. In 1906, a border was drawn through the city of Rafah between Palestine, which was part of the Ottoman Empire, and the Egyptian territory controlled by Britain. A free trade area was established in Rafah. In 1917, Gaza became part of Mandatory Palestine, which was transferred to Britain by the League of Nations.

After the State of Israel was created, the first waves of Palestinians arrived in Gaza, mostly from the Jaffa area. Under the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Egypt, signed on the island of Rhodes through the mediation of the UN on February 24, 1949, the Gaza Strip was created which was pushed into the desert and cut off from what used to be Palestine. In addition to the local population of 80,000 people, 200,000 refugees arrived in the area for whom, according to Filiu, the enclave became a kind of Noah's Ark. However, the local infrastructure was not enough to integrate and accommodate all newcomers. To solve the problem, the UN created eight camps for Palestinians in the enclave, including the largest of them, Jabalia, in northernmost Gaza. Fully cognisant of the role of the situation in Gaza for the country's security, the first Prime

Minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, proposed at the Lausanne conference that Israel annex the sector and allow 100,000 Palestinians to return to their former homes in Israel. However, his plan was spurned in both Israel and Egypt.

This historical journey and a discussion of the still underestimated role of historical memory in the national identity of the Palestinians, where the cultural and civilisational importance of Gaza and the symbols associated with it constitute cornerstones, allow us to explore some previously used but still applicable theoretical tenets.

Myths, political theory, and Yemen

These tenets include the theory of symbolic choice, or symbolic politics, which was first applied by the American sociologist Murray Edelman to study ethnic conflicts and wars.¹ It comes down to an assumption that people make choices in response to a symbol that evokes strong emotion.

Emerging from psychological approaches, the theory of symbolic choice opposes the widely held theory of rational choice. The latter views ethnic groups as coalitions that are formed to pursue rationally defined goals, such as possession of resources and goods, control over territory, and the like. However, from the perspective of the theory of symbolic choice, the decision made by an individual largely depends on *how* a particular idea is presented to them. Both theories primarily operate under the concept of ethnicity. They are easily applicable to actions related, on the one hand, to religious motivation, and on the other hand, the actions closely linked to political goals, such as actions of an ethnic nature.

Notably, the *myth-symbol* combination is central to understanding ethnicity as part of the symbolic choice theory. A myth is understood as a “*belief shared by a large group of people that gives events and actions a certain meaning*,” and a symbol is an “*emotionally charged reference to a myth*.” Stuart Kaufman, a professor of political science working within the paradigm of the theory of symbolic choice, contributed significantly to using it in researching specific ethnic conflicts, including in the post-Soviet space. He wrote² that the myth-symbol complex represents a “*network of myths and associated symbols*,” and people make choices by responding to the symbols presented to them.

The paradigm of the emergence of ethnic conflict looks like this: *fear* of the destruction of a group (or the destruction of its identity) leads to the emergence of animosity and then group violence. An atmosphere imbued with animosity and threats increases group solidarity and prompts people to view events through the lens of ethnicity or in ethno-religious terms. In any

¹ Edelman M. *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*. New York: Academic Press, 1971.

² Kaufman S.J. *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*. Cornell University Press, 2001.

case, the fear of seeing Islamic civilisation and cultural identity disappear and, consequently, the loss of their position by the socio-political groups that base their legitimacy on it, can generate aggressive hostility and violence as much as the fear of the extinction of an ethnic group. One example is the consolidated reaction of Muslims worldwide to the caricatured depiction of sacred symbols in the media.

The weaknesses in identity and difficulties associated with conducting mobilisation policies can be overcome using the myth-symbol complex by way of fuelling hostility based on a variety of historical and religious mythological constructs. In turn, these myths are built on interpreting politics in ethnic or religious terms. Mythologising the events that took place in the early centuries of Islam through symbols can encourage people to view contemporary events through a religious lens. It is not about denying certain events or doubting the veracity of a modern interpretation, but about assigning symbolic meaning to them that incites political action. Ethnicity and religion are so closely intertwined that ethnic mobilisation can appeal to religious motivations and vice versa.

Saddam Hussein referred to the war against Iran as his Battle of al-Qadisiyyah of 636 A.D., in which Arabs defeated the Persians and later converted them to Islam. Ethnic and religious motives were combined, even though the Iran-Iraq War of the 20th century was fought by people of the same religion. However, the Qadisiyyah myth-symbol failed to make the Arab population of Iran side with Iraq.¹

The above helps us understand the developments in Yemen and the Red Sea since early 2024 against the backdrop of the tragic events in Gaza. The Ansarallah's actions appear irrational if viewed solely from the perspective of political pragmatism.

As we know, from the outset of the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Sanaa authorities have consistently sided with Palestine. On October 19, 2023, they declared war on Israel and fired several cruise missiles into its territory. The missile attacks continued on October 27 and 31 and November 1, 8, 9, and 14. Concurrently, mass marches of solidarity with Palestine took place in all urban areas controlled by Ansarallah. Opposition to Israel, the United States, and the United Kingdom became a key theme of the Houthi leaders' speeches. In mid-November 2023, Sanaa authorities banned the passage of ships towards Israel and the passage of Israeli ships through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait following which they seized the *Galaxy Leader*, a vessel owned by an Israeli businessman. In early December, they began attacking commercial ships that ignored Yemeni border guards' demands to check ship cargo manifests. When

¹ See also: Naumkin V. Civilizations and Identity Crisis // Russia in Global Affairs. 2014. № 1. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/civilizations-and-identity-crisis/>

the number of attacks exceeded 20, the United States, declaring on December 18 the start of the anti-Houthi Operation Prosperity Guardian sank three Yemeni border patrol boats from two army helicopters which the Sanaa authorities saw as an attack on a sovereign state. On January 3, 2024, the United States and its allies issued a final ultimatum to Sanaa, and on January 10, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2722 where it “affirms the exercise of navigational rights and freedoms by merchant and commercial vessels, in accordance with international law, must be respected, and takes note of the right of Member States, in accordance with international law, to defend their vessels from attacks, including those that undermine navigational rights and freedoms.”

Literally the next day, on January 12, the US and the UK launched strikes against Yemen. According to Russia’s representative to the UN Vasily Nebenzya, these strikes violated international law and were not sanctioned by the above resolution. More attacks against Yemen followed. Considering the country’s geography, these attacks cannot destroy Ansarallah, but will only worsen the already difficult humanitarian situation, on the one hand, and promote the international status of the Houthi movement, on the other hand.

To understand the logic behind Ansarallah’s behaviour, it is necessary to take into account the movement’s ideology which was formulated by its founder Hussein al-Houthi (1959–2004) in his lectures recorded in 2001–2003. According to Russian Houthi researcher, Timofey Bokov, the ideology is based on the “us vs. them” dichotomy. “Us” refers to Arab Muslims, with the best being Zaydis, and the best of Zaydis being Sayyids who are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. “Them” primarily represents the West and Israel, who humiliated and enslaved the Arabs, and took their place in the modern world. Other associated beliefs include the golden age of Islam (the time of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali ibn Abi Talib), the inseparability of Islam and politics (religious faith must be translated into political action), narratives of terrorism imposed by enemies to discredit Arab culture. There are also concerns about the enduring dangers of imperialism and colonialism.¹

Despite the seemingly local nature of the Houthi phenomenon, the ideology that has allowed them to consolidate and mobilise significant masses of the Yemeni population for over two decades is not centred on the Yemeni agenda. Broader ideological issues are at its core. Israel, the United States, and Western countries that do what they do being thousands of kilometres away are declared enemies rather than rivals inside the country. The myths-symbols are presented in a very colourful manner, because the myth of an existential threat to Arab Muslims posed by enemies compels them to rally under the banners of the best of the best, namely, the Sayyids.

¹ Бокров Т.А. Политическая идеология хуситского движения (по материалам лекций Хусейна Ал-Хуси) // Ислам в современном мире. 2017. Т. 13. № 4. С. 95–112.

Lessons

The region of myths

The tragedy in Gaza extends far beyond the territory of Palestine and even Israel. Formulas emphasising the importance of the Palestinian issue, which have been repeatedly expressed in various meetings, may have seemed ritualistic, but they are a very real motivating and mobilising factor for the political forces operating thousands of kilometres away from the Gaza Strip. A serious question arises: is the connection between Ansarallah and Palestine a random occurrence, or is it a system-forming feature of relations in that region?

We believe it's the latter.

Symbolic politics and historical memory in the region are not just tools used by the elite to manipulate public sentiment, but are real factors in political life. Numerous examples illustrate their impact. Here are a few examples.

Hamas mobilised its forces for Operation Al-Aqsa Flood (*Tofan Al-Aqsa*), taking seemingly suicidal actions in the name of the symbol of Palestinian independence which is located outside the Gaza Strip. When describing their enemies, radical Islamists invariably refer to the Crusades myth-symbol, directly equating Western countries with conquerors from ancient times. Syrian tribes, which opposed both ISIS¹ and the Western countries, linked the former to the 18th century Wahhabis and the latter to French colonisers during the mandate period. When drafting its national development strategy Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia focused primarily on re-interpreting national history and emphasising its deep pre-Islamic roots. Turkey's activity in the Middle East is often interpreted by both supporters and opponents through the lens of perceptions of the Ottoman Empire, while Iran is associated with the roots of the Persian Empire. Even in the Maghreb countries which are geographically distant from the Middle East, matters of historical memory, around which the myth-symbol complexes are built, become central. Morocco and Algeria compete for the right to be considered the homeland of the Sufi brotherhood of al-Tijaniyyah or engage in conflicts over traditional Zellij ornamentation.

Examples abound and include tragic and almost comical situations, but all of them show that continuity has always been there. Perhaps, this is partly related to the unfinished process of modernisation and the preservation of elements of tribal narratives characterised by an “epic” non-historicised worldview. Regardless of the time and place, the events in these narratives always follow the same patterns. This applies not only to the Arab and Muslim parts of Middle Eastern societies, but the Jewish part as well, as evidenced by the popular identification of Israel with David opposing Goliath or the memory of the tragedy of Masada.

¹ Banned in Russia.

Conflict resolution in the region cannot ignore the importance of a symbolic victory by one side or the other and respect for its *dignity* (Arabic: *karama*). Ideas of exchanging Palestinian territories for significant amounts of investment which were popular during Donald Trump's administration are out of place precisely because of the demonstrative disrespect for the needs and aspirations of the Palestinian side and neglect for the dignity of the Palestinians.

This includes other implications: victories and defeats in various battles in the Middle East should not be considered victories or defeats in wars. If history is endless, if the memory of these conflicts lasts for millennia, symbols do not lose their formidable allure, and myths are captivating, then the destruction of the enemy's infrastructure, seizing its material assets, and the physical elimination of leaders will not lead to a final solution. The opposing side is in for the long haul, and by physically destroying it the opponent only creates new symbols of struggle and heroic myths.

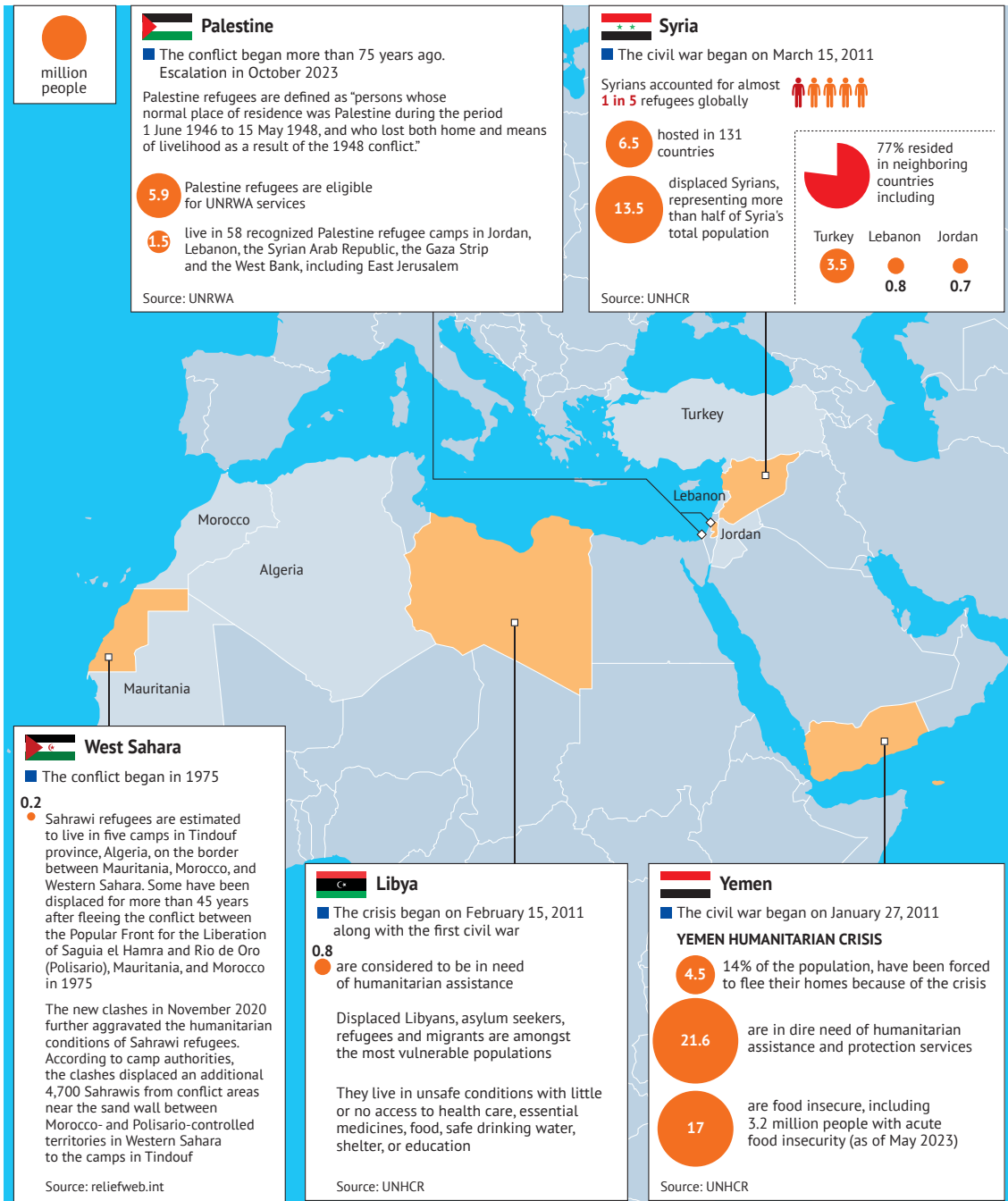
Myths and non-state actors

Another relevant matter concerns non-state actors and the future of statehood in the region.

Typically, the significant role of non-state actors is mentioned in this paper in connection with weak state institutions, whose functions these actors take on in part or in whole. So, Hamas, Hezbollah, Ansarallah, and numerous militias from Libya to Iraq gained public support primarily due to social activism and their ability to provide social support to the people, and more. In this sense, their ability to ensure security can be seen not as taking away its monopoly on lawful violence from the state, but as a continuation of the policy of replacing weak public institutions. This strategy, at least in three cases, Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, and Ansarallah in Northern Yemen, has led to non-state actors becoming quasi-states controlling specific territories. Considering this, their ability to build relationships with other international forces should be seen as a step towards replacing the state or transforming non-state actors into public entities. The conflict between Ansarallah and Israel, the United States, or other Western powers is the next level that elevates the role of the movement in the international arena and, practically speaking, forces other actors to recognise it as an entity that is equal to a state.

However, this functional model does not allow one to fully grasp the meaning of the non-state actors' activities. Ultimately, if guided by pragmatic considerations, these organisations would be better off limiting themselves to their internal activities, rather than claiming the role of independent foreign policy actors. But this is impossible from the standpoint of the symbolic choice. Political actors must assert themselves in the external environ-

MODERN CONFLICTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



ment, proving to its own population the right to existence and affirming its political status. This is why Israel and the United States, rather than other Lebanese, Palestinian, or Yemeni political organisations, are the key adversaries of Hezbollah, Hamas, or Ansarallah. Opposing them legitimises their political activities in the eyes of the local people and gives meaning to their social activities.

This interpretation allows us to understand why none of these three movements can be considered Islamist in the full sense of the word. Indeed, they all advocate for organising socio-political life based on religious principles. They use religious symbols and rhetoric extensively and invoke the memory of religiously significant times and events. They all have something in common in the system of their activities and their articulated narrative, although they belong to three completely different (and often mutually hostile) Islamic currents: Twelver Shi'ism, Sunni, and Zaydi.

However, none of the three movements is attempting, first, to implement a global religious project; and second, the main enemies for all three organisations are forces that threaten the national dignity and sovereignty of Arab-Islamic states rather than the religious truth (materialists, communists, liberals, representatives of other religious groups). This is why anti-colonial rhetoric and the idea of resisting occupation are so important.

Provided this assessment is correct, we can assume something new about political Islam as such, making the perception of certain myths-symbols a crucial criterion when typologising various Islamist movements. This perception largely determines the relationship between the global and the national, the religious and the nationalist for the purpose of setting goals.

However, all this does not imply the disappearance of the question that is sacral for political Islam researchers about the possibility of the instrumental use of a national agenda by a particular group while maintaining a deep belief in the eschatologically predetermined victory of Islam.

The transformative power of myths

The situation in Gaza and Yemen leads us to explore the architecture of the regional subsystem of relations in the Middle East and North Africa. Even in this issue that appears to be far from the emotional sphere, symbols and feelings are of critical importance.

In fact, what we see is two diametrically opposed interpretations of regional dynamics.

According to one, there has been a gradual process of transformation in the region over the past few years, during which: a) the Gulf area as the core of the regional subsystem became stronger; b) the nation states (and corresponding country nationalisms) became stronger, while various transna-

tional unity projects (Arab, Islamic, and others) were marginalised; c) relations between Israel and several Arab states normalised based on pragmatic motivations.

The “sprawl” of the Middle East and North Africa and the formation of sub-regions were seen as a possible outcome. Under this scenario, each of them could continue to develop following its own logic: Maghreb as a bridge between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe; the Fertile Crescent as a territory of degraded states and an area of confrontation for external actors; and the Gulf and Israel (possibly Egypt, too) as the core of a new system incorporating countries whose claims go beyond a regional role. Under this scenario, which essentially predicts the disappearance of the Middle East and North Africa as a single regional space, the events in question seem remnants of a long-gone era, a distant echo. The Israeli government’s military move in Gaza is likely based on this approach.

Truth be told, this approach has its rationale. After all, no Arab state that signed the Abraham Accords has renounced them since October 7, 2023, and even Iran, which is strongly opposed to Israel, was reluctant to engage in the armed conflict. However, if it’s just an echo, why is it so loud?

An alternative interpretation of regional dynamics suggests that ongoing pragmatic transformations are being compensated for by emotional factors. Emotions, symbols, myths, and collective memory are the threads that tie the space together. The events surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque which is located outside the Gaza Strip motivate the residents of Gaza. The inhabitants of the mountainous regions of northern Yemen are motivated by the events in Palestine thousands of kilometres away. Israel and Iran are existential enemies even though they don’t have direct points of contact. After Morocco and Israel started moving towards each other, Algeria began to perceive Israel as a clear and direct threat and practically declared war on it in 2023. These events show that emotions are not just a real but a system-building factor in international relations.

The availability of unifying myths and symbols makes it possible to describe the Middle East as a unique region in the world. These myths and symbols offset the lack of intraregional economic ties and the divergent political aspirations of the regional elite. They also form the basis for building humanitarian ties across the space “from the Ocean to the Gulf” and further to the east.

Finally, they impact the intra-regional re-assembly processes. The sudden spotlight on the Red Sea not just as another conflict zone, but as a crossroads where the interests of many local, regional, and global players intersect is a striking example. In theory, it could claim its own security net.

In their entirety, these circumstances allow the Middle East and North Africa to maintain a partial impermeability to external influences despite

the activities of non-regional actors there. Perhaps, due to its partial impermeability, this region, which has been connecting the West to the East and the south to the north for millennia and continuously absorbing, mixing, and reinterpreting all possible cultures, traditions, customs, and beliefs, still amazes the world with its unparalleled expressiveness.

Finally, let's dare to assume that the unique nature of the region and the profound bonds between the people who live there based on shared emotions, memories, myths, and symbols can guarantee its agency under any global arrangement better than anything else, including the economy, technology, or the political aspirations of the elite.

Syria: The Crossroad of Middle Eastern Uncertainty

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I. A baker's dozen of years in transformation

For nearly a decade and a half now, the word “transformation” has arguably been the most popular term to describe the Middle Eastern developments, including transformation of societies and economies, political systems and institutions, foreign policies and international alliances, strategies pursued by non-state and state actors, and regional and global powers. In a word, transformation of everything in the whole wide world. Presumably, this is enough time to at least begin to see the general outlines of a new regional order. However, each year something happens that compels analysts to start their reflections anew with the timeless acknowledgment of uncertainty of the current situation.

Changes have unfolded in cyclical patterns. The tumultuous upheavals of the early 2010s were followed by a relative slowdown towards the end of the decade, only to give way to a new escalation. This process can be divided into four phases.

First phase

The first phase lasted from 2011 to approximately 2013–2015 (varying by country). It was a period of mass uprisings, regime changes, weakening statehood, and integration of moderate Islamist forces into the legal political framework in most countries in the region.

Second phase

The second phase began around 2013–2014 in some countries and in 2015 in others. It was marked by a *revanche* launched by anti-Islamist forces in Egypt and Tunisia, along with the emergence of a more defined – compared to the first phase – structure of armed conflicts.

In Libya, the 2014 elections to the House of Representatives formalised the internal East-West face-off that persisted into the following decade, regardless of changes in the institutional façade of the political system.

In Yemen, the military operation launched against the Ansar Allah movement by a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of countries cemented the political landscape in 2015. It set Ansar Allah and the former ruling party, the General People's Congress, against the “legitimate” government (Shar'iya) and its ally, the Southern Transitional Council, which pursued its own agenda.

In Syria, the deployment of a Russian military contingent in the autumn of 2015 allowed the government in Damascus to survive for nearly a decade, providing an opportunity for political reforms and progress towards a political settlement.¹ As is

¹ See Vasily Kuznetsov, Vitaly Naumkin, Irina Zvyagelskaya. Russia in the Middle East: The Harmony of Polyphony. 21.05.2018. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/report-russia-in-the-middle-east/>

well known, Damascus failed to seize this opportunity. Like Libya and Yemen, Syria also experienced a reconfiguration of its conflict. Kurdish forces emerged as an independent (and major) player, ISIS¹ took control of a significant territory, and after the establishment of de-escalation zones, the Syrian opposition, which was based in Turkish-controlled areas, began forming territorial government bodies. This phase concluded in 2019–2020.

Third phase

Over three to four years that followed, a trend emerged towards reduced armed conflict intensity, though not towards resolving them. ISIS appeared to have been defeated. Despite numerous initiatives to settle conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, none achieved a lasting peace. Other countries that had also experienced painful transformations showed a noticeable trend towards weaker political opposition and power consolidation in the hands of governments. These governments, however, faced serious economic challenges and failed to propose new social contracts similar to those that had previously ensured relative stability of the political regimes in the 20th century. Back then, tacit agreements implied limited political freedoms in exchange for security and growth. Yet, in the modern context of growing international tensions, uncertainty, crises in global governance institutions, the pandemic, and food market shocks, prospects for growth have faltered.

A sweeping wave of protests ripped through Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan resulting in government overthrows in Algeria and Sudan. Algeria managed to recover quickly and restore internal stability, but Sudan spiralled into yet another armed conflict. Some analysts referred to this process as Arab Spring 2.0.

Fourth phase

The fourth phase is unfolding right before our eyes. In 2023–2024, the war in Gaza, Ansar Allah's activity in the Red Sea, escalated tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border, exchanges of fire between Israel and Iran, and the toppling of Bashar al-Assad in Syria have marked the beginning of a new phase.

Importantly, this phase is far from being over. For it to conclude, stable political systems must be established in Syria, Libya, and Yemen; clarity must emerge regarding Palestine's status; political crises in Lebanon and Iraq must be settled; the issue of mercenaries must be addressed; and political authorities in a number of countries must gain public trust and implement workable development programmes.

None of that is in place, and it's unclear how it might come about.

¹ Recognised as a terrorist organisation in Russia

One possible reason for this transformational deadlock is that the challenges faced by regional societies are tied not only to the institutional design of political relations, but also to their ideological and conceptual content.

It is striking that, despite the eventful nature of recent years, prevailing political narratives in the region have been enviably consistent. In most cases, we witnessed the same interpretations of liberal, conservative, Islamist, or nationalist realities. Each of them offered its own explanation of global, regional, and national events, postulated its own set of values that shape responses to change, and suggested specific strategies for political behaviour. Each such narrative also had its own set of supporters and antagonists, whose competition determined the alignment of socio-political forces in specific contexts. For instance, after a brief period of enthusiasm in 2011, the liberal camp yielded to Islamists, whose triumph was also short-lived. Conservative and nationalist forces then emerged, seemingly reflecting a global trend of the past decade. However, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime has reopened the door for Islamists to re-enter the political scene.

All of the above creates a sense of perpetual déjà vu. Years pass, generations of leaders change, the world around them transforms, revolutions give way to stagnation, yet the agenda remains the same: endless unsolvable conflicts, debates over the same social development challenges, and attempts to reconcile the dichotomies of civilisational choices.

On the face of it, the GCC countries, primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have come up with an exception to the general rule. They have launched several strategic development projects, which, however, failed to make a significant difference for the broader regional situation.

Things are quite different in the case of political institutions. The “uprising of the masses” that began in 2011 tested not the narratives, but rather the institutional architecture of Arab political systems, which took shape over decades of independent development, and were simply not designed to accommodate political participation of that magnitude. This led many experts in the 2010s to speak of a crisis of the Middle Eastern (or Arab) model of statehood and to revisit questions about whether the concept of a nation state is even applicable to regional polities, whether alternatives exist, and whether new social contracts in the region could be forged.

Traditional political transitology recipes failed to work in the Middle East (the issue of whether they are effective elsewhere in principle deserves a separate study.) Despite numerous declarations of being committed to democratic ideals, the West failed to provide support for institutional change in the region, and things came down to little more than simplistic slogans.

The upheavals revealed not only the fragility of many political systems, but also the resilience of more traditional political institutions, such as tribes, family and clan groups, ethno-religious communities, and others. Their significant adaptive capacity made it possible to form horizontal social links even amidst the critical weakening of state, as seen in Lebanon and Libya. Ironically,

FOUR PHASES OF ESCALATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A period of mass uprisings, regime changes, weakening statehood, and integration of moderate Islamist forces into the legal political framework in most countries in the region

A trend emerged towards reduced armed conflict intensity, though not towards resolving them

- 1 Despite numerous initiatives to settle conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, none achieved a lasting peace
- 2 A sweeping wave of protests ripped through Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, and Sudan resulting in government overthrows in Algeria and Sudan

2011–2015

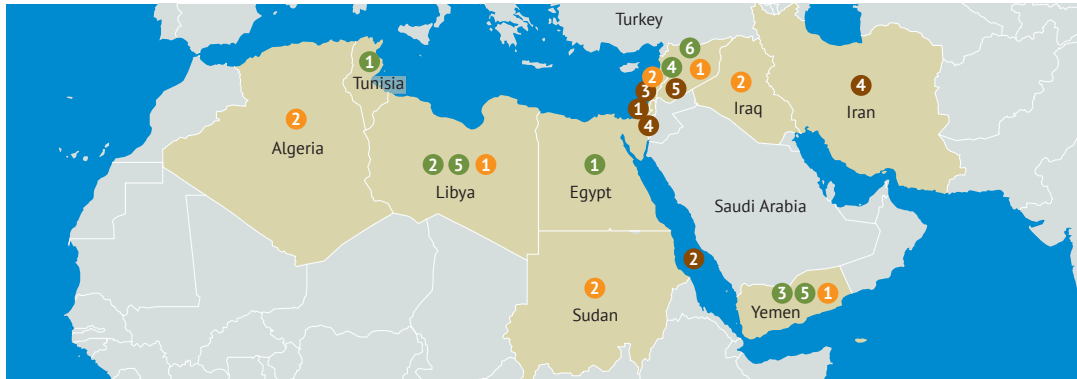
2013–2020

2020–2023

2023–2024

- 1 Revanche launched by anti-Islamist forces in Egypt and Tunisia
- 2 In Libya, the 2014 elections to the House of Representatives
- 3 In Yemen, the military operation launched against the Ansar Allah movement by a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of countries in 2015
- 4 In Syria, the deployment of a Russian military contingent in the autumn of 2015
- 5 Reformatting of conflicts in Yemen and Libya
- 6 The Syrian opposition, which was based in Turkish-controlled areas, began forming territorial government bodies

- 1 The war in Gaza
- 2 Ansar Allah's activity in the Red Sea
- 3 Escalated tensions along the Lebanon-Israel border
- 4 Exchanges of fire between Israel and Iran
- 5 The toppling of Bashar al-Assad in Syria



Fundamental principles underlying Russia's policy in the Middle East, in general, and Syria in particular, which are non-negotiable:



Moscow's commitment to reinforcing Syrian statehood, protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity



Continuing the fight against terrorism



Rejecting all forms of neocolonialism



Supporting the legitimate Syrian government



Advocating for a political settlement of the conflict in accordance with international law

Combined with tactical flexibility, adherence to these principles should suffice for Russia to continue playing a positive role in Syria and, more broadly, the Middle East

the stability of informal institutions took a toll on public demand for strengthening formal ones, which in some cases became completely detached from social realities. This is evidenced by electoral campaigns in the Arab world, which revealed critically low levels of public support for the ruling elites. In Syria, for instance, the destruction of whatever feedback mechanisms between society and the state were available became a key factor in the decline of the Ba'athist rule.

At the systemic level, the region faces two key goals which are to break free from the vicious cycle of entrenched interpretations of reality and to restore balance between formal and informal institutions, thereby strengthening statehood.

Both of these challenges are perhaps most evident in Syria today.

II. Agenda for Syria: Institutions

Though Syria's political system has undergone little formal change, it has transformed significantly during the conflict. By 2024, the system bore all the hallmarks of a fragile order with limited access. In practice, it meant a weak ruling coalition held together by personal guarantees provided by individual leaders around whom various groups of stakeholders coalesced. Its key features included an overabundance of mechanisms in charge of decision-making and control, but a shortage of mechanisms to convey demands from the lower level up; parallel power verticals, including family and clan groups, security entities, the state apparatus, the Ba'ath Party (Arab Socialist Renaissance Party), and religious institutions; and direct fusion of public administration institutions, resource distribution systems, and business entities. This system, while outwardly cohesive, was in reality highly chaotic and dependent on strong personalism for survival. The continuous efforts to reinforce it further eroded the institutional foundations of power.

The fall of Bashar al-Assad and the rise of new forces pose serious questions about the future of the state, which can only be preserved through a series of comprehensive reforms. Five following key areas stand out.

First. The new government must reintegrate partially or wholly independent security entities into a unified national system of armed forces and intelligence services. The country's leadership is fully aware of the importance of this objective, and has taken steps to ensure loyalty of national security forces and to integrate various militias. This process, however, will take time and require significant restraint from all parties involved.

In theory, ensuring local armed groups' loyalty shouldn't be a problem and can be achieved by integrating their leaders into the governance sys-

tem and providing them with security guarantees. In practice, this seemingly straightforward move is complicated by weak oversight over pro-government armed forces on the ground and actual external threats faced by border region residents, primarily in the southern regions.

The more complex issue lies in ensuring that, once it has assumed power, former armed opposition groups identify with the state itself rather than individual political forces.

This gives rise to more challenges such as preventing blood feuds between former adversaries; making sure that membership in security forces is perceived as everyday public service rather than access to rent; and, finally, ways for the civilian administrations to gain armed forces' loyalty.

Second. The second set of challenges that can be resolved only by way of conducting extensive reforms includes fostering trust in the new government among the technocratic bureaucrats, who represent the state at the local level and have suffered from mismanagement just as much as the rest of the Syrian population. As demonstrated by the experience of other countries, the absence of such trust can undermine any political regime in the long term.

The new leadership recognises the importance of maintaining interaction with the former state apparatus and has made no changes to the diplomatic corps so far.

However, the old system can hardly be retained in a number of areas, including the security sector and ideologically meaningful institutions such as the education system, the Ministry of the Economy (its influence in the state apparatus needs to be increased), and the Ministry of Local Administration and Services. The latter appears to be particularly crucial in the medium term, as one of the primary tasks will be ensuring public access to basic services. This will be no easy feat to accomplish amid economic devastation and hyper-urbanisation, since up to 40 percent of the country's population resides in Damascus and its suburbs.

Third. The leadership must establish feedback channels between the government and society, as well as mechanisms for legal political expression of demands which will entail revising policies regarding political parties and movements.

The Ba'ath Party had approximately 1.8 million members in recent years, which is less than during Hafez al-Assad's era when up to 18 percent of the population was its members. Despite declining activity and popularity, the Ba'ath Party remained a meaningful tool for consolidation and elite renewal, as well as local governance. It was the only body whose members were sufficiently skilled to be able to balance the interests of various societal groups at the local level. Six decades in power allowed the Ba'ath Party to gain administrative expertise, while simultaneously eroding other governance mechanisms. Following the repeal of Law No. 8 in 2012, the party legally transitioned to self-sufficiency, managing its immense assets of its own accord.

This raises several questions: What should be done with the assets owned by the Ba'ath Party, which are now officially managed by various state agencies? Who will be able to use the competences gained by the party cadres? And what new governance mechanisms will replace those of the Ba'ath system?

As a reminder, in Egypt under Anwar Sadat (just like in the Soviet Union during perestroika), the ruling party was dismantled from inside out through formation of separate platforms that eventually gave rise to new parties. The Ba'ath Party has the potential to carry out this kind of transformation. However, Syria embarked on a different path and effectively froze the Ba'ath Party's activities. Tunisia employed a similar mechanism and dissolved the Democratic Constitutional Assembly. Initially, new forces like the Ennahda Movement (Renaissance Party) and later Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) tried to take its place. When this failed, a deep crisis broke out in Tunisia's party system. Syria's mature tradition of party politics does not rule out such risks.

Two scenarios are likely to play out given the circumstances. Either military-political organisations morph into political parties, or traditional institutions of societal self-organisation, such as tribal groups and ethno-religious communities, take centre stage. These processes may well occur simultaneously, effectively Lebanonising Syria. However, unlike Lebanon, where communal self-organisation and strong local leadership traditions have continued uninterrupted, Syria has largely lost them. Reconstructing it under current circumstances appears highly improbable.

Fourth. Separating state agencies from sources of rent will be among the most critical challenges for the new government. This involves more than combating corruption, but redefining the *raison d'être* of state institutions. It is not so much a how-to methodological question, but more a value-based inquiry into “what” to do and “why” to do it that stems from the fundamental understanding of the purpose of the state.

Fifth. The concept of the political system's inclusivity is directly related to *raison d'être*, but remains ambiguous in modern-day Syria.

In its narrowest sense, it, without a doubt, refers to the inclusion into the political system of a variety of entities that once represented the Syrian opposition and have now come to power. Over the past several years, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham¹ consolidated control over most factions in Idlib, but failed to become the sole representative of the opposition forces. Ironically, achieving consolidation now that it has come to power will pose an even greater challenge for it due to the lack of a single strong adversary, on the one hand, and opposing visions for Syria's future, on the other hand. Questions remain about how the new elite will form and who will be part of it and who will be excluded.

¹ Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham – Organisation for the Liberation of the Levant – is recognised as a terrorist organisation and banned in Russia.

In a broader sense, inclusivity entails representation for all Syrians. This could follow a consociational model, as seen in Lebanon and Iraq. Quite naturally, the new government and especially its international partners will push to replicate the experiences of neighbouring states. However, even if we turn a blind eye to the fact that neither Lebanon, nor Iraq can be considered models of stable and effective political systems, we cannot forget about restrictions imposed on consociationalism by Syria's ethno-religious makeup. Sunnis comprise three-quarters of Syria's population, with other confessional groups being highly fragmented, which makes proportional representation impractical. Similarly, Arab dominance makes proportional ethnic representation unviable. Instead, efforts should focus on protecting minority rights. The third option, regional inclusivity, is doubtful and is complicated by the conflict-driven population redistribution.

Another approach to inclusivity could involve incorporating a broad spectrum of ideological perspectives in the political system. This raises questions about the return to power of officials from the former regime (and the potential for lustrations, which failed in Iraq) and the kind of restrictions that may be imposed on creating political parties. Will regional or ethno-religious parties be allowed (likely not), and how will Islamist activity be regulated? Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's history makes Islamist participation in the government unavoidable. Truth be told, Islamists are represented in the political systems of most other Arab countries, but their representation tends to be limited to moderate factions and implies strict bans on radicals. Criteria for distinguishing between the two vary across different countries and remain unclear in the context of a new Syria.

The political integration of Islamists has not brought them political dominance in any country, and their efforts to Islamise political systems have failed. This is why they strive to Islamise societies across the board which, in turn, calls for overseeing individual institutions.

This underscores the importance of the ministries of education, justice ('adala), and Awqaf. In recent years, the Ministry of Awqaf gained extraordinary powers to oversee the religious life and infrastructure. However, historically, Syria managed its religious sphere through decentralised systems and complex relationships among various institutions and leaders. Some of these leaders remained loyal to Damascus during the conflict, while others joined the opposition. Deciding who will manage Syria's religious infrastructure today is as critical as addressing the Ba'ath Party's legacy.

Overcoming the above issues will pose a challenge for the new government. On the one hand, they will desperately need the support of external forces, without which it will be nearly impossible to improve the economic situation and secure public loyalty during the period of transition. On the other hand, to implement the necessary reforms and address the complex issues outlined above, they will have to demonstrate a commitment to Syria's national sovereignty and their willingness to act in the nation's interest.

III. Agenda for Syria: Territorial realignment

So far, the discussion has focused on the functional aspects of the political system, but there is a host of issues related to its geographical dimensions, including boundaries and administrative-territorial arrangements. Today's agenda includes a variety of options ranging from fragmentation of Syria to various forms of decentralisation.

The fragmentation of Syria, or forgoing its territorial integrity, is arguably the worst way to conduct territorial realignment. Romanticised narrative about establishing several states (Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish, and Druze) similar to the Mandate-era model have little basis in reality. There are no guarantees such entities would succeed. Recent global developments suggest that instead of one conflict-ridden state, we are likely to see multiple unstable states, none of which would have the economic potential to survive.

Moreover, any change to borders sets a dangerous precedent for the entire region. While the post-colonial agreements that shaped the modern-day map were imperfect, and the circumstances surrounding their development and adoption were none other than flawed, the region has existed within these borders for nearly a century now, and revisiting these agreements could open Pandora's box.

In this regard, expansionist ideas expressed by a number of political forces in Israel and Turkey appear dangerous. Attempts to implement these ideas will pose a threat not only to Syria, but to these countries as well, and their identity will be called into question. Certainly, there should be no talk of annexing (or acknowledging the annexation) of Syria's southern regions, including the Golan. Even the mere threat of this scenario playing out could be used by Syrian Islamists and nationalists as a consolidating factor.

Another realignment option includes a variety of strategies to decentralise Syria, including federalisation, which has so far been rejected by the authorities.

Regarding decentralisation, its principle is theoretically declared as an almost imperative by all Arab states. However, the situation is more complex in practice. Typically, the discussion revolves around choosing between administrative decentralisation, which implies delegating authority from the centre to the periphery; economic decentralisation, which involves the distribution of resources; and political decentralisation, which entails regional representation in national governing bodies. The first type is implemented relatively often, the second less frequently (e.g., in Lebanon), and the third almost never, unless federalisation is in question.

The very idea of decentralisation or even federalisation in the case of Arab countries implies a social contract between the elites of individual regions and the groups inhabiting them regarding the distribution of resources and rent. The most striking example of this model today is Iraq, whose constitution provides for the allocation of oil royalty among regions in proportion to their population.

However, other examples can be found in the 20th century as well. For instance, although the unification of Saudi Arabia occurred through the annexation of various regions into Najd with the use of force, the status of each region was determined individually based on the existing balance of power. As Arabist Grigory Kosach demonstrated¹, while the elites of Hejaz were not directly co-opted into the country's political leadership, they assumed a dominant position in several domains of state policy. In the history of the UAE's formation, similar agreements between the ruling families of the emirates were even more pronounced. The refusal of Qatar and Bahrain to join the federation was directly linked to the inability to establish the necessary balance. Finally, in the Sultanate of Oman, modern statehood emerged from the union of two entities, namely, the Sultanate of Muscat and the Imamate of Oman. In Yemen, the process unfolded first through the unification of the country's southern regions into South Yemen and later through the merger of the south and north.

All these examples (monarchic Libya and Iraq can be listed among them as well) confirm the 20th-century Arab world's trend towards forming states by consolidating disparate regions into one whole. In all these cases, the trajectory unambiguously followed the path from fragmentation to unity through local elite groups striking agreements that were followed by centralisation. Successful examples of reverse process from a (hyper) centralised state to a state comprised of autonomies or a federation are nonexistent. Iraq is probably the only, albeit highly controversial, exception to this rule.

The Syrian case, however, stands apart as well. Historically, the country has been characterised by a high degree of territorial fragmentation. One can speak of several culturally, politically, and economically distinct areas that have taken shape historically within its borders, namely, Damascus and Aleppo, which have competed with each other for centuries; the coastal region of Latakia; and the country's inland areas, particularly Al-Hasakah. Economically, before the conflict broke out, Damascus and its suburbs, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Al-Hasakah, were Syria's most developed regions. However, Idlib, which in recent years has become one of the most densely populated regions, has remained an agricultural and economically underdeveloped province.

Both Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad sought to address decentralisation, with the former passing Law No. 15 On Local Government on May 11, 1971, and the latter enacting a law No. 107 of the same name on October 1, 2011. However, as the conflict unfolded, the chances of seeing these laws ever implemented dwindled. Damascus increasingly viewed decentralisation as a direct threat to Syria's unity, while territories beyond its control have developed independent economic systems, which aligned either with Iraqi Kurdistan or Turkey.

These factors have created a brain-wracking puzzle for Syria's new leadership. On the one hand, decentralisation appears to be a promising strategy to integrate

¹Косач Г.Г. Саудовский дипломатический корпус: этапы эволюции источники формирования. М.: Ин-т Ближнего Востока, 2008.

regional elites into governance and to share responsibility for the country's future with them. In theory, it could also offer a potential resolution to the Kurdish issue, leveraging the experience gained during the Damascus-Kurdish authorities' talks.

On the other hand – and the Assad regime's logic comes into play here – decentralisation amidst grave external threats, fragile institutions, weak central authorities, economic devastation, and economic disparities between the regions, many of which are simply unable to sustain themselves, risks leading the country to disintegration.

Co-opting regional elites into national governance bodies rather than formal decentralisation might be a potential alternative given the circumstances.

IV. Emotional aspects of statehood

The emotional aspect of strengthening statehood is also at play.

The startlingly swift collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime can be attributed not only to the institutional crisis, but also to the simple fact that, in a hyper-militarised country that has endured a decade or so of civil conflict no one was willing to take up arms to defend the ruling group. While covert operations and informal agreements helped the insurgents prevail, these factors are still secondary to society's unwillingness to support the regime.

This marks a significant difference between the 2024 developments and 2011, when Syrian society was deeply divided. The events of 2024 bear similarities to Tunisia and, to a lesser extent, Egypt in 2011, where leaders like Ben Ali or Mubarak were also left without anyone to defend them.

During the height of the Syrian civil war, both sides were driven to consolidate by an existential sense of survival where defeat meant physical annihilation.

Today, the absence of the existential dimension of the conflict opens doors to compromise. However, compromise alone is not enough to build a new state. Spanish philosopher and sociologist José Ortega y Gasset noted in his essay *Invertebrate Spain* that understanding national unity as a dynamic system requires both centrifugal and centripetal forces. While centrifugal forces remain in the system naturally from the way it had been formed, centripetal forces are shaped through “an inspiring plan for a life in common”: “nations are made and go on living by having a program for the future.”¹

In fact, proposing a project of the future has indeed become a crucial step forward for the Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and several others in strengthening their sovereignty in recent years. In the case of Syria, the way the new authorities envision the country's future is important in this context.

¹ *Invertebrate Spain*. Howard Fertig, New York, 1974

Considering the history of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the first thought that comes to mind is the establishment of an Islamic state. Over the years of HTS's control over Idlib, it has shown a capacity for internal transformation towards reduced radicalism and greater pragmatism. Today, its positions are closer to those of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹

The experiences of some countries suggest that HTS's interpretations of religious norms could align well with the idea of a "civil state" (*dawla madaniya*), encompassing protection of the ethno-religious minorities, procedural democracy, and other elements. But the problem lies not in the situation-specific decisions, but the overall approach on which they rely. Critics of Islamism argue that its political flexibility is purely opportunistic and does not negate its ultimate goal of establishing a true Islamic state. This implies that threats to minorities will not go anywhere no matter how soft the Islamists' position may be.

Clearly, within the Islamist logic, assuming control over the education system, the judicial system, and the Ministry of Awqaf is of paramount importance. In fact, the initial steps taken by the new authorities demonstrate efforts precisely in these areas.

Several areas of potential conflict are in the offing. One is inside the Islamist camp between radicals and moderates, as well as among supporters of various currents of political Islam; and between Islamists and nationalists of different stripes. Syria's territorial integrity, primarily linked to Israel's expansionist ambitions, could serve as a point of consolidation. While Syria currently lacks the capacity for waging a full-scale war against Israel, the push to restore the country's territorial integrity retains its unifying potential at the level of ideology.

It is worth noting, however, that the attempts to focus on restoring territorial integrity were made by Bashar al-Assad's administration as well.

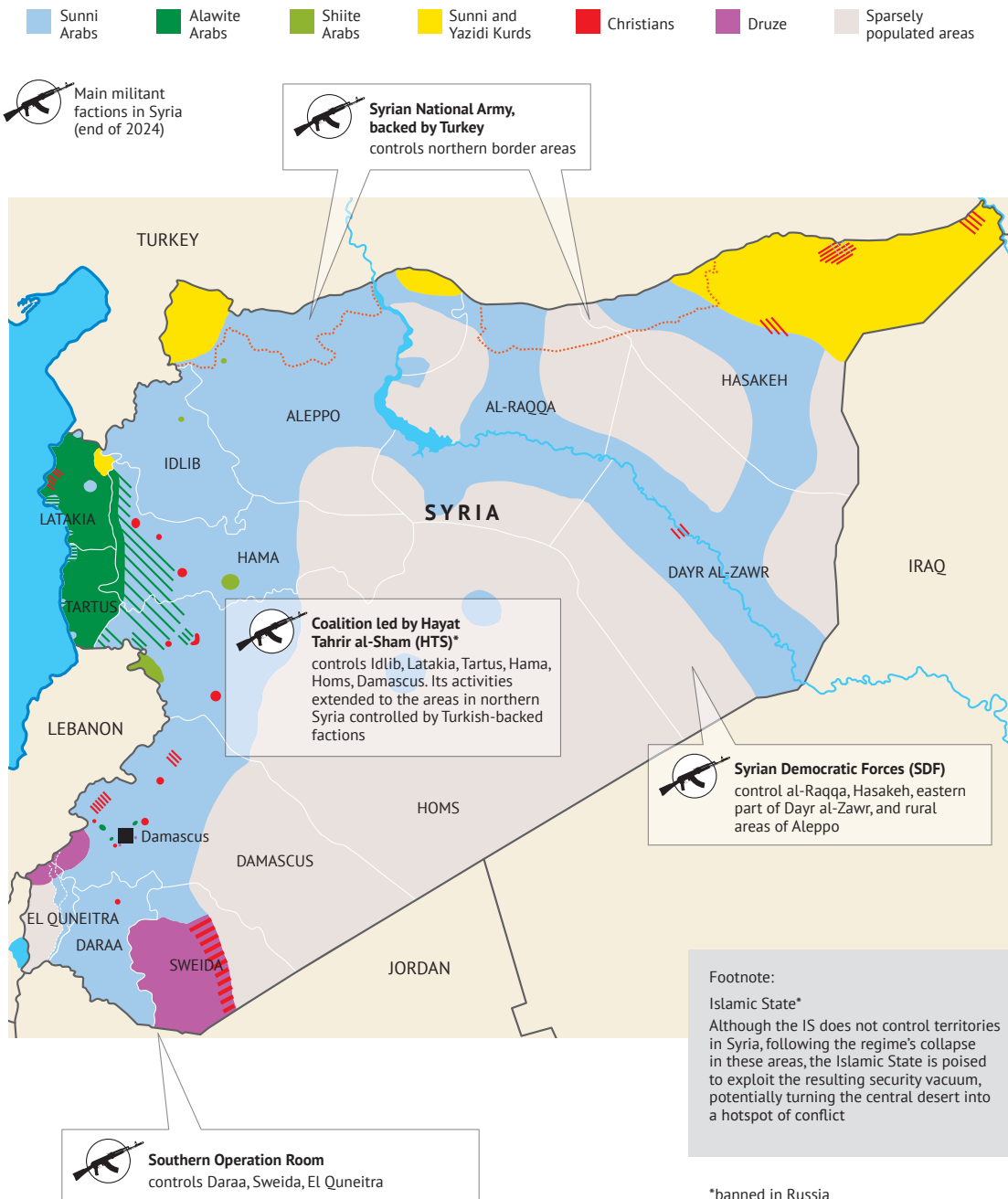
The post-conflict recovery effort could serve as another idea behind unifying Syrian society. In addition to sizable financial investment, this requires fostering an ideology of collaboration among different social strata for a shared future. A promising approach could involve converging Syrian nationalism with Islamism while leveraging Syria's historically strong civil society tenets, both traditional that are rooted in community activities, and modern.

V. Syria and neighbouring countries

All of these Syrian statehood-related issues (though not exclusively Syrian) have become particularly urgent against the backdrop of a rapidly changing regional balance of power. The weakening positions of Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah in Lebanon,

¹ Recognised as a terrorist organisation and banned in Russia.

ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND MAIN MILITANT FACTIONS IN SYRIA



along with the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, have created a window of opportunity for other regional players, primarily Israel and Turkey, as well as the Gulf monarchies. However, the situation is more complex than it might appear at first glance.

Regarding Israel, the country's foreign policy has traditionally been explained by Israelis themselves as an imperative to ensure their own security, including in the Golan. Indeed, massive barrages of strikes on Syria's military infrastructure in late 2024 were supposedly aimed at taking military capabilities away from a potential adversary. However, today the issue is also about further territorial expansion, which is much harder to justify by security concerns. This expansion rather fits into the logic of Jewish ultranationalism, which largely draws on historical mythology. The question remains as to what exactly Israel is aiming for: establishing direct control over certain (which exactly?) territories or creating a wide buffer zone, possibly under the aegis of a friendly political regime. This question, as well as the reaction to Israel's actions not only from Damascus but also from the Druze population in southern Syria, remains open.

The situation with Turkey is equally complex. Ankara's interest in inflicting a strategic defeat on the Kurds and possibly creating a buffer zone along the Syrian-Turkish border is understandable. The outcome here will primarily depend on what the Kurds and the United States which supports them will do. The United States is interested in maintaining leverage over its Turkish partners and the new Syrian authorities, but the extent of their commitment to investing in the Kurds under the Trump administration remains uncertain. It's also unclear whether the positions of the Kurds and the Islamists holding key positions in Damascus may converge.

The Gulf monarchies which feel triumphant in Syria and Lebanon, especially given the new Lebanese president's alignment with Saudi Arabia, represent another group of actors. Unlike Iran, Turkey, or Israel which are militarily engaged in the Syrian affairs, the Gulf monarchies can strengthen their position primarily using economic leverage. This mitigates threats, but also limits the prospects for enhancing their influence in the country. Potential escalation of the Syrian-Israeli conflict and the likely radicalisation of new Damascus authorities clearly do not align with the interests of the Arab monarchies. Truth be told, the interests of various GCC countries vary, and their alignment is not always clear. While Qatar has always been in opposition to the Assad regime, the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia had shown willingness, until recent events, to improve relations with Damascus. Considering these circumstances, the mediation efforts of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, which maintain relations with all Syrian actors, could come handy.

Iran, whose interests suffered the most from the events of late 2024, should not be overlooked when discussing the role of external actors in Syria. Following the critical weakening of Hezbollah and the fall of the Assad regime, it appears that

the Islamic Republic has lost a significant portion of its clout in the region. However, things can change. Ultimately, the portion of Lebanon's population whose interests Hezbollah represents did not go anywhere, nor have the competencies and resources gained by the organisation over decades of activity. The same applies to Syria. Tehran has invested heavily in building a support base on the ground, and if the new Syrian authorities fail to consolidate society, Iran may have another shot at restoring its influence, even if only partially.

Finally, Damascus itself also matters. At this juncture, it appears to be facing several foreign policy goals.

First, it needs to achieve as much international legitimacy as it can, which is why we witness numerous visits by high-ranking foreign diplomats, the opening of embassies, and a meeting of foreign ministers in Riyadh. Notably, the temporary nature of the current situation is almost always emphasised.

Second, it must strengthen its position inside the country, preventing it from turning into a battleground for armed rivalry between various external forces. This will require not only addressing the numerous domestic political development issues mentioned above, but also ensuring economic support (the lifting of sanctions and the interest on the part of the Gulf monarchies seem critically important). Additionally, it will depend on the new authorities' ability to maintain a complex balance of interests among regional and global external actors, including Russia. It is also important to what extent Damascus will be ready to adhere to its declared strategy for implementing the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

Third, the forces that have come to power in Damascus need to identify their foreign policy priorities. Will they act in the interest of strengthening Syrian statehood, or will a group that is more focused on bolstering Islamist forces across the region prevail? In the latter case, the outlook for Syria overcoming the crisis any time soon does not look too good.

The situation in Syria gives rise to numerous questions. This, in itself, is not unusual, since everyone has become accustomed to perpetual Middle Eastern uncertainty. What is unusual, however, is the intensity of the situation at hand, and future developments will significantly impact the entire Middle East. The importance of this situation is not only dictated by Syria's geographic location or the intertwining interests of nearly all regional and most global actors in the Syrian conflict, but also by the nature of the challenges haunting the republic. To varying degrees and in less acute forms, these challenges have appeared and continue to manifest in most countries of the region.

As for Russia's policy in Syria, it must account for the above uncertainties and the variety of possible scenarios.

Indeed, there are fundamental principles underlying Russia's policy in the Middle East, in general, and Syria in particular, which are non-negotiable. These include Moscow's commitment to reinforcing Syrian statehood, protecting its sovereignty and territorial integrity, continuing the fight against terrorism, rejecting all forms of neo-colonialism, supporting the legitimate Syrian government, and advocating for a political settlement of the conflict in accordance with international law.

Combined with tactical flexibility, adherence to these principles should suffice for Russia to continue playing a positive role in Syria and, more broadly, the Middle East.

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