

# REPORT

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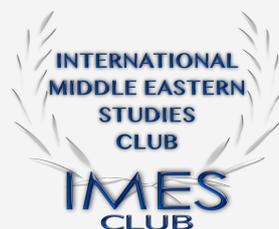
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**Geopolitical and Regional Dynamics  
OVERVIEW**



## **Geopolitical and Regional Dynamics: an Overview**

**( Amb. Alexander Aksenok, one of three key speakers)**

It's been three years since a series of mass uprisings in the Middle East has changed the political configuration of the region. Most of these countries are going through a painful transition period. It is not entirely clear what development models will eventually form in the course of the region's revolutionary transformation. For all existing multivariate scenarios it seems that we could, at least, select a block of questions that define vectors of the current changes and try to offer expert answers.

There are many examples showing the revolutionary pendulum swinging too fast in the opposite direction with the most devastating consequences for the people and the state. At the turn and at the end of the last century, Russia herself gave the world similar tragic examples. More than once, the history of world revolutions witnessed power coming to those who managed to ride the revolutionary wave rather than to those that actually brought these revolutionary changes about. The Arab Spring that began with democratic slogans once again demonstrated to the world the famous historical pattern.

The new generation of Arabs shocked the world with their passionate calls for upholding human dignity, social justice, the right to a better life and national development. However, it is impossible to ignore the other side of the coin. Nowhere in the Middle East do transformation processes go as smoothly as in Eastern Europe. In the absence of an attractive alternative to the slogans of Islamic renewal, equality and social justice Islamists managed

to seize the initiative and win a landslide victory in parliamentary elections. The resulting tight knot of internal, as well as regional conflicts led to new threats and challenges of global dimension.

Over time, fair and democratic slogans proclaimed by protest movements are turning or have already turned into a banal means of struggle for power. With the disintegration of national and state homogeneity and the increasing threat of failed states emerging in the region, international terrorist groups are strengthening their support bases in North Africa, Yemen, and in sub-Saharan Africa, and in the last two years, in the heart of the Arab world - Syria. All this undermines the basis of international security in the context of a weakening global governance system, which is also experiencing a period of high uncertainty after the collapse of the bipolar world.

Let's discuss the regional and the global aspect of the new situation so dramatically and largely unpredictably evolving in the Middle East.

### The Regional Aspect

Judging by the sharp confrontation and external interference that accompany the 21<sup>st</sup> century Arab Awakening revolutionary in nature, we can say that the Middle East has entered a long period of instability (up to 10-15 years) with a randomized political field, economic decline and state degradation. Some countries (Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Syria) have seen an increased risk of disintegration, terrorism and other manifestations of Islamism of radical nature. The new ruling elites (Egypt, Tunisia) have not

managed to consolidate power and show their ability to move forward and realize the proclaimed democratic goals and ideals. With the current unstable balance of political forces, the reconstruction of the region will continue to run unevenly, in a flexuous manner, with a tendency to backpedal.

Arab Spring confronted the entire international community with a new political reality: political Islam in power. And no longer just in theory, but in terms of practical politics and diplomacy.

Islamist parties in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco proclaim moderatism and confirm their readiness to play according to modern democratic rules. This has allowed them to gain international legitimacy. Whereas in Libya and Yemen, where transformation processes are aggravated by traditional regionalism and tribalism, the soil for militant Islamists' extremism is more fertile. Power-hungry Syria's Muslim Brotherhood can also be hardly described as moderate, although theoretically, they claim to be reviewing their previous hard-line postulates. In this case, as Libya's sad experience shows, the method used to rise to power, whether through dialogue and national reconciliation, or through violence, civil conflicts along with foreign armed intervention – plays an important role. The change of social structure caused by justified demands but using forceful means, moreover, through civil wars, does not directly lead to a steady course of national development.

Now the question arises as to whether the Islamist movement, a new political force with its ideology of New Nationalism, will be able to meet the high expectations of the Arab Street. This will require reconciling modern

democratic norms and pragmatism in politics with the conservative ideology of Islam, as far as the state political system goes. If this does not work, then the concentration of the levers of power in the hands of Islamists, that is the replacement of one dictatorship by another, will cause - and is already causing in Egypt and Tunisia, the reaction from the secular part of society and the Christian minority. This will inevitably complicate the tasks of the transition period, plunging the country of the winning political Islam into a whirlwind of revolutions and counter-revolutions.

The internal political struggle unfolding in Egypt is becoming the focus of special attention. The rift between the Islamized part of the community influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and Muslims and Christians not accepting the Islamization of social and political life, has manifested there most clearly. The polarization is going not so much along the social lines - and this is one of its characteristic features - but rather depending on the view of the modern world on traditional values and norms of Islam and the problem of maintaining national and cultural identity in the context of globalization. The same processes are under way in Tunisia.

Once in power, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood faced great challenges and great risks. Immediately after the parliamentary and presidential elections, contrary to their election promises to cooperate with all national forces, respect minority opinions and establish a modern democratic and constitutional state, they headed for the monopolization of power in the hands of the president. All this is accompanied by the Islamization of the

legal system, state apparatus, power structures and all aspects of social life. Secular political forces and revolutionary activists have interpreted this as usurpation of power, with the president actually assuming dictatorial powers in the interests of one political force.

The contradiction between expectations, sometimes too high, and the lack of opportunities for their rapid implementation in everyday life is becoming increasingly apparent. In the absence of tangible results from the changes, the feelings of frustration and political apathy widespread in the public consciousness, particularly among the revolutionary youth, are more and more often turning into aggressively belligerent mood. However, one must admit that the revolutionary youth's anti-regime protests no longer reach critical mass, and despite calls for a new revolution a significant part of the population view the president as the first democratically elected head of state.

At the same time, opposition to the new Islamist government remains divided and unable to accept an alternative program, and choose further tactic steps. The probability of forming— under certain conditions — an influential opposition force as part of coalition including liberal and moderate nationalist parties, Social Democrats and young revolutionaries supported by non-islamized part of Egyptian generalship, theoretically exists, but so far seems minimal.

The moderate flow in the Islamist movement in power needs to reconcile the modern democratic norms and pragmatism in politics with the

conservative ideology of that part of the Salafi movement that has gained momentum and adheres to the medieval interpretations of Islam and strict Sharia law. It is not so easy, because it means, in fact, renewal of Islamic law, especially as regards the theory and practice of state-building in the modern world. The resulting internal conflict within the Islamist movement itself is already growing and will continue to do so in the future.

The Muslim Brotherhood's and Salafists' programs differ in many ways. Egyptian Salafism takes Saudi Wahhabi as its state model. For Egypt, with its secular foundations and traditions of religious tolerance, such total Islamization is inevitably connected with new outbursts of mass action – this time, against those who “stole” the revolution.

Muslim Brotherhood leaders declaring their readiness to play by modern democratic rules seriously fear competition from radical Islamists who can press them specifically on the religious front. In this case, they will face a dilemma - either to risk narrowing their social base, or jeopardize their relations with the West, whose financial assistance Egypt desperately needs.

There is no doubt that without massive external support neither Egypt, or Tunisia, or other countries in the region are likely to emerge from the crisis. Meanwhile, in the present state of the world economy the possibility of providing such assistance is very limited, no matter how many statements regarding this issue have been made from potential donors .

In the long run, one may assume that the entire course of transformation processes in other parts of the Middle East region is likely to depend on the

pattern of social development that will prevail in Egypt.

The tough presidential system of government has apparently exhausted itself. The overthrow of Mubarak and Ben Ali has shown that after breaking the barrier of fear the Arab society is rejecting this model as one associated with dictatorship. Rather, the development of political systems will proceed in line with the best practices of nonviolent change of government traditions if, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood allow to continue holding electoral procedures in accordance with the generally accepted democratic norms. Both the West and Russia are working in this direction. In my view, quite a broad agreement regarding fundamental strategic interests has been reached at this point, even despite apparent differences of opinion .

One of the factors affecting the entire Middle East situation is the civil war in Syria. Objectively speaking, this internal conflict has caused a clash of interests not so much between Russia and the West, but rather between the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf and Iran. It is not accidental that the majority of experts, and not without reason, consider the current escalation of tensions a manifestation of the Sunni-Shiite rivalry. More than once throughout the Islamic history, it resulted in sanguinary wars. In the West, the civil war in Syria has become known as «proxy war». The world experience of such civil and, especially, religious wars shows that there are no devils or angels there. Spiraling out of control, this circle of violence is developing its own dynamics which becomes hard to reverse.

The change in the regional balance of forces across the Mediterranean

Sea to the Persian Gulf largely depends on the ultimate outcome of this conflict - first and foremost, between the leading regional players, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt.

On the other hand, it should be noted that it was B. al-Assad's Ba'athist regime that virtually fueled internationalization of the internal conflict due to its inability to timely realize the need for the existing political system to change when it had exhausted its potential, and its forceful response to the initially peaceful demands for reform. If the 10 year civil war in Algeria (1992-2002) was the result of a too hasty reform of the political system, then Syria is a classic example of how stubborn attempts of the rulers to preserve the integrity of something that has outlived itself can lead to catastrophic consequences for the very existence of the nation state.

Islamists, particularly of the militant wing, were able to fill influential positions in the political leadership of the National Coalition and the combat units of the Syrian opposition. By many estimates, the armed wing numbers about 200 groups and organizations competing with each other in the struggle for financial flows from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Libya, for the distribution of smuggled weapons and political influence.

In the context of continuing lack of cooperation between the opposition forces, the forceful change of regime in Syria is fraught with the armed struggle for power among the winners themselves, with numerous Islamist militant groups having a higher chance of success. Such an outcome will entail disastrous consequences for the entire region. It may result in a

collapse of the Syrian state, threaten the fragile state structure of Iraq and Lebanon, as well as foundations of the monarchy in Jordan, to be followed by redrawing of the map of the entire Middle East.

The threat of the long-term destabilization of the region, in case the radical wing of the Islamist movement takes over has sunk in, and the West is gradually becoming aware of possible consequences. With such a turn of events, there is a chance the foreign policy strategy of the international community to support moderate Islamists and incorporate them into the general democratic context together with their values compatible with this context may fail. In this case, the breach in the relationship between the West and the Islamic world is likely to become more civilized.

The Arab Spring, a particularly violent internal conflict in Syria, the approaching elections in the United States, growing economic problems in Europe - all this has pushed the issue of the Middle East settlement to the wayside among foreign policy priorities. Over the last years, this process has reached a complete deadlock. The Palestinians have reached the limit of their concessions with 40% of the Palestinian territories being developed by Israeli settlers, and Israel expressing no interest in the negotiation process which could result in the return of the territories, the evacuation of settlements and compromise on Jerusalem. Since the beginning of Barack Obama's second term, Americans have cautiously resumed their mediation mission, although the conditions for this have deteriorated significantly compared to the situation four years ago. The resumption of the peace process in the changed

circumstances will force the U.S. administration to put pressure on Israel and find the approaches that would help them not to lose face in the context of their strategy to establish rapport with the Islamists. It is hard to imagine how this can be achieved in view of the fact that the U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East has not yet managed to escape from the contradictions between the two interests too hard to reconcile: commitment to the allied relations with Israel on the basis of common values and the realization that the continuation of the Arab-Israeli conflict is becoming more and more detrimental to the fundamental interests of the U.S. in the Muslim world.

### The Global Change.

The Middle East upheavals have directly affected the interests of foreign players with their traditional presence and influence in the Middle East. In the early days, the international community went through the adaptation process to the new situation experiencing a lot of hardships and facing severe political clashes - between Russia and the West, as well as between Western countries themselves - during the collective decision making (however, in a milder form). Clashes also involved the countries of the region that are now performing their own parts in the big Middle East game. The role of extra-regional actors is now gradually decreasing.

By and large, the beginning of the Arab Spring did not generally reveal large discrepancies in the positions between Russia and most Western countries, although some differences in the nuances became promptly apparent. In the West, as if by inertia, the tendency to idealize Arab

democratic revolutions seemed to prevail. Some even found the situation similar to the one that led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing changes in the countries of Eastern and Central Europe at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Russia, for its part, supported the just aspirations of the Arab people and their right to a better life, but the emphasis was more on the inadmissibility of foreign intervention and the need to address the problem of internal development through political dialogue.

The Arab problem has become a top priority issue of the international agenda only in the wake of Libyan and especially, Syrian events, when the disagreements turned into an open conflict. The problem of external interference, its limits and nature in the case of internal conflicts has gone far beyond regional boundaries and has become part of international policy. Even given limited possibilities of external influence on the chaotic processes in the Arab region, their internationalization has already been recognized de facto and de jure. It should be specially noted that it has largely been instigated by the Arab states themselves.

Decision making in Libya's case has become for Russia the main challenge. At the time when the sanctions resolution was discussed at the UN Security Council, considerations of global politics and constructive partnership with the West prevailed. But it did not clearly articulate the limits and conditions for the use of force by the international community. Russia did not prevent the adoption of the resolution. This allowed the Western and the Arab countries who had committed themselves to the practical

implementation of the UN mandate to conduct a military operation that tipped the scales in favor of the Libyan opposition. That is, the United Nations - and even more so, NATO as a top performer of the UN Resolution 1973 - in fact, became accomplices of the regime change by military intervention from outside.

Libya's lesson has largely predetermined the tough position of Russia in the discussion and voting on the resolutions on the situation in Syria, where the analogy with the Libyan scenario was traced to the fullest.

By and large, events in Libya and Syria after Yugoslavia and Iraq once again highlighted the major differences between Russia and its Western partners on the issue of so-called humanitarian interventions and the legitimacy of a regime change by force. The question of the legal grounds for deligitimizing regimes undesirable to a group of states has once again become the subject of intense international battles.

Is suppression of civil liberties, disproportionate use of force in the event of mass opposition demonstrations, acts of violence and other violations of human rights or international humanitarian law a sufficient enough legal basis for such actions? If the international community fails to give a coherent answer to these urgent questions in a set of universal rules of international behavior, then the world will continue to feel the destructive impact of the policy of "fait accompli" and the logic of political expediency.

The collapse of the Westphalian system has long been under way, and it would be best to have it regularized. What was once unconditionally ranked

as belonging to the category of internal affairs has been increasingly turning into a global issue. It is indeed an objective process at a time when the world is becoming more and more interdependent and informationally transparent.