

What Is Going on in the Middle East?

A Pragmatic Point of View

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PART I

Even the most thorough writings on the “Arab Spring” have paid little attention to the genuine forces behind this phenomenon and their real purposes. Meanwhile, we strongly believe that the revelation of these purposes, which undoubtedly exist but are unknown to the wider public, is necessary for answering perhaps the most significant question of today’s politics: What consequences may sociopolitical explosions in North Africa and the Middle East have in regional and global terms?

To answer the question adequately, we need to start by examining the true causes of the uprisings in a set of Arab countries. First, the basic cause, as pointed out in many analyses, is the extremely imperfect political systems in the Arab states that have been formed in the postcolonial period. These imperfect systems are characterized by growing social problems generated by demographic situations (namely rapid population growth during the last three decades), clan-type economies, pervasive corruption, high rates of unemployment, patronage and nepotism, flagrant social polarization, weak and corrupt judicial systems and rule of law in general, frequent violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, reluctance and inability of ruling elites to carry out necessary reforms aimed at democratization, and so forth.

Let us suppose that the abovementioned factors stimulated social tensions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria, which finally brought about the sociopolitical revolutions in these countries. The question then arises, why did the most conservative (if not reactionary) regimes in Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain avoid the same destiny? Arguably, the most popular explanation is that the “exceptionally large and unconstrained” budgets of these oil-rich monarchies allowed them to carry out relatively more effective social policy or, as Michael Ross put it, “fiscal pacification.”¹ However, this explanation is far from exhaustive and does not withstand any constructive critique. Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was known as one who had the most consistent policy in this sense. Under his reign, the standard of living of the average Libyan citizen was among the highest in the region, let alone the widespread access to education, medical services, and even considerable financial assistance to young families.² Ironically, Colonel Gaddafi was precisely the one who was savagely assassinated.

Almost everyone knows that spontaneous revolution is possible only in Italian writer Gianni Rodari's children's tale *Il romanzo di Cipollino* ("Tale of Cipollino"), but the notion that the imperfect governance, social inequality, and above all social networks played a critical role in some of these Arab revolutions continues to dominate intellectual discourse on the Arab Spring.

We shall argue that this is certainly not the case. Although these factors played their part in mobilizing people in relatively short periods of time, they were by no means critical to transforming popular grievances into open and organized insurgencies. Dissatisfied politicians and militaries—unhappy with their rulers, authorities, country's political course, or their own position—as well as simply marginalized individuals are present in every society, and especially in those without older traditions of political culture. However, to succeed in toppling the ruling regime, these groups and individuals need either to constitute the majority of the population (which is impossible) or turn into an underground group, organize a conspiracy, and remove the regime through a coup. Neither of these situations was observable in these Arab countries either before or after the uprisings. Quite understandable and explainable civil disturbances briefly escalated into armed revolts and swept out ruling regimes with considerable political and financial help from the outside. Indeed, every such revolution needs tremendous financial resources. One would hardly disagree that organizing and arming an insurgency with appropriate propaganda support in a relatively short period of time costs big money.

According to one of the most popular interpretations, the United States and leading European powers (increasingly the West) were the financiers and organizers of the Arab revolts. According to this line of thought, by using its whole arsenal of political and information technologies, the West has changed regimes in a set of Arab countries in order to strengthen its influence in the Middle East and take regional energy resources and transportation routes under its direct control.³ Proponents of this version of events provide both direct and indirect evidence in support of their viewpoint. For example, the training of professional Internet bloggers to mobilize the capabilities of virtual space for organizing mass protests is indirect evidence, whereas NATO's military strike on Gaddafi's army is direct evidence. However, what proponents of this interpretation most frequently cite as underpinning their arguments is an initiative by then-U.S. President George W. Bush known as the Greater Middle East. (We will talk about this initiative a bit later.) It is worth noting in the meantime that the legitimacy of this interpretation that insists on the West's hand behind the Arab revolts is highly questionable. First of all, because it oversimplifies the situation in the Middle East and ignores numerous controversial facts related to the formation of new geopolitical configurations in the region.

However, before examining this line of thought thoroughly we need to address the aforementioned American strategic initiative, the Greater Middle East.

The Greater Middle East initiative (or project) was primarily related to the oldest and highly problematic political issue of the contemporary world—the Arab-Israeli conflict—and was aimed at finding solutions to this problem acceptable to both parties. Secondly, although the initiative is very recent, it belongs to an epoch of the United States' absolute domination in the world economy and finances, as well as in ideological, military, and other spheres, which is nearly over. In other words, the initiative was suggested in the times of the “unipolar world,” which gave rise to the phenomenon of “American messianism.” In contrast to previous messianic (and in effect imperial) theories, it was confined to the “advancement of democracy.” Thus, the Greater Middle East initiative was also aimed at modernization and democratization of the Arab world by involving political, economic, financial, scientific, military, and other elites of some Arab countries in world processes. It was speculated that such involvement would perhaps stimulate radical sociopolitical reforms, desperately needed for resolving growing internal tensions and for creating appropriate conditions for development in these societies.

Indeed, discounting several palace coups that did not really change anything, Arab societies have been full of increasing contradictions since the early 1950s. They constituted (and continue to constitute) in effect a strange mosaic, where medieval thinking is combined with an overall desire to exploit the achievements of contemporary civilization. All this has been based on the strong belief in the infallibility and rightness of Islamic dogma. Apparently, this has prompted Americans and others to conclude that the sophisticated mosaic will inevitably crumble. Moreover, such collapse will cause serious and at times bloody shocks, especially in those parts of the Arab world where ruling elites will try to resist the process. Hence, the West reportedly decided to organize inevitable sociopolitical explosions in the Arab world in order to guide the revolutionary energy toward modernization and democratization.

Thus, the interpretation insisting on the West's critical role in organizing revolutions in Arab countries stretching from Libya to Syria may be divided into two lines of arguments. The first line puts the West's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests at the center of explanation, while the second line attributes the organization of uprisings to the West's desire to modernize and democratize the regional states. Both lines of arguments are highly questionable.

As we mentioned earlier, proponents of the first line of argument suggest that the Arab Spring was basically aimed at:

- Changing regimes disloyal to the United States and leading European powers in order to strengthen the West's influence in this strategically important region, and
- Putting energy production and its transit in the North Africa and the Middle East regions under the West's control by creating loyal and, in fact, puppet regimes.

This interpretation sounds plausible from a geopolitical point of view. However, the implementation of the suggested plan leaves many points unclear. Indeed, regime change in Libya and Syria might well be considered desirable in Washington and some European capitals. Tripoli and Damascus were trying to play independent roles in the region and were therefore consistently resisting all Western initiatives. In the case of Libya, the situation was even worse. Colonel Gaddafi often carried out openly confrontational policies regarding his Western "friends." However, under this scenario, it is even harder to explain, and even more so to justify, the regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt, which were extremely loyal to the West. In the case of Egypt, things appear yet more unclear. From the 1970s on, Cairo was obviously playing a stabilizing role in the Middle East. Further, it consistently stood as a guarantor of all-Arabian nonalignment against Israel. On the other hand, attempts to explain the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions as struggles for energy resources led to a dead end. Egypt's energy resources are very limited, while Tunisian oil and gas scarcely cover that country's own domestic needs. In contrast, there is plenty of crude and natural gas in Algeria, where roughly ten years ago we were witnessing a genuine civil war. And it is worth remembering that the methods the Algerian government used against armed but civil rebels and in suppressing popular protests were much bloodier and ruthless than those we have seen in Syria and even Libya. However, the West then did not even think about interfering in Algerian domestic issues, let alone consider military intervention. At the same time, Western policymakers enthusiastically agreed with the claim of Algerian authorities that they were fighting Islamic extremism. Although today's Syrian government is making the same claim, the West's reaction is diametrically the opposite. However, it is worth mentioning that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently acknowledged that if the West finance and arm Syrian opposition forces, it will most possibly strengthen Al-Qaeda, which is behind this opposition.⁴

As for the second line of argument, it urges us to ask the question, if the West has financed and organized the recent Arab revolts in order to modernize and democratize the Middle East, why then did it not start with Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Oman; namely, with genuinely medieval and, all the more, hereditary "Oriental despotisms" that possess roughly half of the

world's discovered energy reserves? If the reason is these countries' pledges to reform their political systems, modernize social life, and stay loyal to the West indefinitely, that is out of the realm of "Realpolitik" and thus cannot be considered a satisfactory answer. Rather, the oil monarchs made an offer the West could not refuse, specifically to reshape the entire Arab world in its image and likeness; in other words, to make it politically loyal, trouble-free in economic and financial terms, and, most importantly, religiously autonomous, especially from Iran and its bid for religious domination in the Islamic world.

The last point explains a lot in terms of the West's readiness to accept the inevitable ascendance of orthodox Islamic movements and organizations to power in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and possibly Syria. One may assume that once the Islamists come to power in these countries, their transformation into fundamentalist regimes that stifle every sign of democracy and civil freedoms will be inevitable. However, that hardly bothers Western policymakers. What is genuinely important to the West is that the process will result in the division of the Islamic world into at least two antagonistic camps: pro-Western, led by Saudis and other regional monarchies, and anti-Western, where Iran will stand as a dominant power.

Thus, having at one extreme theocratic Iran, capable of forging a new coalition of fundamental forces and movements, and at the other Saudi Arabia, successfully preaching its own version of orthodox Islam (Wahhabism), we may soon observe a serious crisis of orthodox Islam.

In sum, the situation is exactly opposite to that suggested by proponents of "the clash of civilizations" concept. In the not-distant past, the latter were bullying the world with their premise that the West's policy in the Middle East was aimed at consolidating the Islamic world in order to turn it into a real and dangerous opponent to "Western civilization" (in Samuel Huntington's term). Without such confrontation, which must stimulate revision of religious tolerance, the chimera of multiculturalism, liberal migration policy, and adoption of tough mobilization models of economic and financial development, "Western civilization" will not be able to cope with increasing economic crises and moral, spiritual, and cultural degradation, and it will soon fall.⁵

However, it is worth reiterating that by coordinating and encouraging changes of secular regimes in a set of Arab countries, the West is by no means consolidating but rather splitting up the Islamic world. As for Saudi Arabia, it has assumed the role of general financier in this political-military game. Riyadh is lobbying this process in international organizations from the United Nations to the Arab League, hiring and arming opponents to the secular regimes in the Arab

states, organizing and coordinating vast propaganda campaigns in the world mass media, and so forth.

Undoubtedly, Riyadh is pursuing its own agenda in this political undertaking. As we noted earlier, one of its basic purposes is to impede Iran's bid for spiritual leadership in the Islamic world. Another not less important purpose is an aspiration to revive an all-Arabian national idea with apparently far-reaching plans of becoming the leader of the Arab world. Indeed, the weakness of the all-Arabian national idea is among the reasons of disunity in the Arab world. Instead, what today uniting roughly 400 million Arabs in more than a dozen countries between the Atlantic and Indian Oceans is the hatred of Israel.

So how long will this process continue? While the interests of the West and the Saudi monarchs coincide, and while their plans regarding Middle Eastern geopolitics are being fulfilled without contradicting one another. What is crystal clear is that in the foreseeable future, we will witness substantial changes in the geopolitical situation of the Middle East. And it is hardly plausible that these changes will be acceptable to all regional actors, including the architects of the Arab Spring. We address these issues in the second part of our "pragmatic point of view."

PART II

The first part of our article was aimed at revealing the actual organizers and sponsors of the Arab revolutions and the goals they pursued. The analysis of the events in North Africa and the Middle East provides us enough ground to suppose that the Arab Spring was organized with direct involvement of Persian Gulf monarchies and with the approval of the Western powers. This initiative was aimed at:

- Division of the Islamic world into at least two antagonistic camps, which would impede the formation of a somewhat anti-Western political-religious union, and
- Revival of an all-Arabian national idea with far-reaching geopolitical goals.

In the second part of our work, we will mostly focus on the question: What consequences may the social, political, and other processes in the Arab East have in regional and perhaps global terms, and how will these consequences influence the states of the Greater Middle East and the whole "Islamic Crescent" stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Great Wall of China? Let us start with the most apparent developments.

Arab Countries

The countries of Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and possibly Syria will be actively splitting for the foreseeable future. The Libyan oil-rich province of Cyrenacia has already declared its autonomy from the central government and has started demarking new territorial boundaries with barbed wire.⁶ A similar secessionist movement was sparked recently in the south of the country.⁷ Yemen has failed to become a unified state. Its expected division into North Yemen and South Yemen currently seems unreal, and it will probably split into more than two de facto independent entities. Iraq has practically divided into three parts and maintains the status of a unitary state only in diplomatic documents. Egypt, according to many analysts, has all the preconditions for splitting into more than two separate entities.⁸ The same sources suggest that the Egyptian army's refusal to accept such a perspective was the central reason that prompted it to assume power in this country for an interim period.

However, the above-mentioned transformations do not bother the genuine initiators and financiers of these processes, which, according to widespread opinion, are Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich monarchies of the Persian Gulf.⁹ Moreover, splitting the Arab states is exactly what these countries were striving to achieve because of the obvious benefits they can derive from it. The benefits are primarily political (or geopolitical) and in part economic. The disintegration of regional countries and the formation of smaller entities will make the latter much more susceptible to external political influence and therefore will ease the task of reviving the all-Arabian national idea. So too it is with oil. Influencing the oil policy of smaller and consequently weaker political entities will require lesser diplomatic and political efforts. It is also worth mentioning that the oil-rich monarchies can derive huge benefit in terms of regional domination and participation in large-scale geopolitical projects and maneuvers. We will discuss the Saudis' and their satellites' benefits more thoroughly throughout this work. Meanwhile, it is more important to pay attention to what may hinder the plans of those who are projecting to redraw the spheres of influence in the region and possibly the map of the Greater Middle East. The first and foremost of these is Iraq.

Iraq

As we have mentioned earlier, the division of this country into three parts is gaining momentum. As a result, the possibility of new states emerging in southern, central, and northern Iraq is becoming more and more realistic. Northern Iraq—populated predominantly by Kurds—needs to be examined in connection with the larger and multifaceted Kurdish problem. For this reason,

we left this issue for the latter part of our work. Yet, it is more important currently to focus on southern Iraq. The developments around this part of the country (richer with hydrocarbons) may influence regional geopolitics greatly. Although this area is populated mainly by Arabs, they are Shiites and recognize Tehran as their spiritual (religious) center. Hence, one may infer that if a new state emerges in the south of Iraq, it will most likely be oriented toward Iran politically and thus may be influenced by Tehran significantly, or even fall under the latter's control. It is worth reiterating that such a perspective is not unrealistic given the weakness of the Iraqi central government and above all the fact that religious identity prevails over ethnic identity in this region. Moreover, Iraqi Shiites have not forgotten the oppression and persecution they were exposed to by Sunni Arabs under Saddam's reign.

This is a worrisome issue for the Persian Gulf monarchies. Needless to say, the emergence of an oil-rich, pro-Iranian state in the south of Iraq will significantly change the regional balance of forces in Tehran's favor. Hence, the Gulf monarchies cannot underestimate this imminent threat when waging their regional initiatives, nor can this factor be underestimated by Iran. Tehran well understands the power of this trump card in projecting its regional policy.

Iran

Although it sounds paradoxical, Iran may find itself in a winning position as a result of the Arab Spring. First of all, one of Tehran's regional archrivals, Egypt, was considerably weakened without much effort by Iran. Despite being a secular state, Egypt had claimed the position of spiritual leader in the Middle East and was promoting its claims by significant financial expenditures aimed at religious education in neighboring states and even in the post-Soviet space.¹⁰ Moreover, Cairo was effectively resisting the attempts of Arab states to build up an anti-Israeli political-military coalition. Using its large and well-equipped army and strong secret service, Egypt was checking the activities of Islamic radicals and extremists, including the Saudi Wahhabites and the Iran-sponsored military-religious organizations.

The Arab Spring "democratic revolutions" swept out the regimes that were resisting Iran's bid for spiritual hegemony and ended up giving way to Iran's greater influence in the region. Today, Tehran's anti-Western, anti-American, and especially anti-Israeli rhetoric, maintained in the background of the extensive Islamization of Arab countries, will strengthen Iran's position in the Greater Middle East. At the same time, it should be noted that the eastward spiritual expansion—toward Afghanistan and Pakistan—may hardly be reckoned by Iran as a promising one. There has been no direct evidence indicating Iran's support to the Taliban during the last

thirty years, particularly while Afghans were fighting against the Soviet invasion and currently with NATO. Such a position by Tehran can be explained by some geopolitical implications, particularly Iran's reluctance to enter into conflict with China and India, which will be inevitable if Iran tries to activate pan-Islamic ideas near the borders of the great powers. (Although Pakistan employs the religious factor in its regional policy, too, it appears to be a supportive instrument in Islamabad's half-century quarrel against India over the Kashmir province.)

The Middle East, however, is another story. Iran seems to be lacking competition here in terms of advancing its influence and projecting geopolitical maneuvers. Moreover, the circumstances stated below are also playing into Iran's hands:

- Arabs have no experience in using a national idea as a means for consolidation, and
- Persian Gulf monarchies and, most of all, Saudi Arabia will hardly be able to claim leadership of the Arab world due to their pro-Western political orientation.

Indeed, for the last six decades, these monarchies were protecting economic and geopolitical interests of the Western powers rather than that of Arabs, whereas the anti-Israeli rhetoric of Iran has struck a chord with the majority of the population in Arab countries.

The question then arises, is it possible that such predictable consequences of the Arab Spring were not calculated in advance? This is practically ruled out! However, this seemingly superficial answer generates another more difficult question, namely, why have the organizers of the Arab Spring—aimed at splitting the Islamic world and weakening Iran's influence on it—gotten the diametrically opposite result? Here we enter the domain of the forecasts that in our opinion perfectly match the logic of regional as well as global politics.

Iran vs. Egypt or Iran with Egypt?

While there is little doubt that Iran will lead the anti-Western camp of the dividing Islamic world, the possible leader of the opposite (pro-Western) camp may hardly be identified with the same confidence. Until recently, Egypt was recognized as potentially the most appropriate country for this role. In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Egypt has both the aspiration and capability to lead the Arabs' consolidation process based on the revival of the all-Arabian national idea. The revolution in this country has just temporarily slowed the strengthening of Cairo's regional position. However, the Egyptian uprising by no means made the idea unpromising or its implementation

undesirable. In other words, Egypt has not given up its claim to regional leadership and will hardly do so in the foreseeable future, which is crystal clear to the Iranian political elite.

The struggle between Iran and Egypt for dominance in the Islamic world dates back to 1979 and continues today, despite gestures of goodwill from both sides. (These gestures are represented in particular by Cairo's permission to Iranian warships to pass through the Suez Canal and the visit of 50 Egyptian social, cultural, and religious figures to Tehran.)¹¹ All these happened after the deposing of Hosni Mubarak, which shows that Egypt continues to be perceived in Iran as potentially the most influential regional force. Iranians rightly suppose that the future balance of forces in the Greater Middle East will be determined mainly by their relations with Egypt. However, their general concern is whether Egypt will remain in the West's orbit of geopolitical influence or...? It cannot be ruled out that Cairo may come to terms with Tehran, which would result in Egypt turning its back on the West, rejecting the latter's economic aid and getting Iran's approval (and possibly support) to take the energy resources of the southern shore of the Persian Gulf under its direct control. In addition to crushing the established geopolitical schemes in the region, such a deal would literally destroy the Gulf monarchies.

One may fairly argue that such an agreement between Tehran and Cairo is unrealistic. Even if the agreement were achieved, the logic of regional geopolitics dictates that it would not herald any durable union between the two countries. However, we should not underestimate the probability of this scenario. Cairo has clearly identified those who prominently wish it ill and will hardly forgive the numerous oil-rich kings, emirs, and sheikhs who financed Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan, and Syrian uprisings. Above all, in post-Mubarak Egypt, rapprochement with Iran may well be considered a powerful trump card, over Riyadh first of all and also others for whom the idea of an Iranian-Egyptian union is equal to catastrophe.

Saudi rulers currently understand that by weakening Egypt, they have just played into the hands of Iran (perhaps even against their will) and have won nothing in return. By virtue of the factors noted earlier, they have found themselves unable to lead the process of all-Arabian consolidation and thus have gotten uncompromising enemies in Egypt and Syria. Moreover, the Arab revolutions have prepared a fertile ground for another regional power to renew its claims to once-held leadership in the Islamic world.

Turkey

Recapturing the leadership in the Islamic world has been the goal of the entirety of Turkish foreign policy in the last three years. We covered this issue several months ago (see Suren Grigoryan, Dr. Vardan Grigoryan, “The Neo-Turkish Gambit,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, October 26, 2011)¹² and here just want to emphasize the most important aspects of Turkish foreign policy. In particular, these are:

- Strengthening anti-Western rhetoric in Turkish mass media and among Turkish officials, which is due at first glance to the issue of Turkey’s membership in the European Union but has, in fact, deeper roots;
- Dramatic deterioration of Turkey’s relations with Israel; the previous mutual understanding of and cooperative approach toward major regional issues has been superseded by deepening confrontation that is reaching animosity;
- Crushing of the army’s leadership, which traditionally stood as a guarantor of the secular principles of this state;
- Political and material assistance to the Islamic movements in the Arab countries;
- Rapprochement with Iran upon a set of regional problems and even readiness to undertake the mediator role between Tehran and the West in solving the Iranian nuclear issue.

All these points indicate Turkey’s aspiration to participate in the already-commenced re-division of the Greater Middle East and to find a new geopolitical niche. However, on the way to realizing its ambitions, Turkey will inevitably clash head-on with Iran and Egypt equally. Earlier in this work, we argued that there is a plan to split up the Islamic world into at least two antagonistic camps. However, Turkey’s renewed bid for regional leadership indicates that the Middle Eastern geopolitics will be dominated soon by three competing power centers.

Will this competition escalate to conflict, and the conflict to immediate military action between the competitors? This is quite possible. It is worth remembering that history witnessed such a precedent merely three decades ago when a similar struggle for geopolitical domination in the region between Iran and Iraq escalated into a large-scale war. Both parties of the conflict then spent the considerable part of their exchange reserves, lost roughly a half-million people each, and were compelled to abandon their geopolitical ambitions for a long time. If a similar collision

starts today, the situation will be the same: numerous human losses and tremendous financial expenditures, and, again, none of them will become a regional (let alone Islamic) leader.

Israel

The only state that may find itself in a winning position in this situation is Israel, whose most dangerous opponents will weaken each other. Even though Ankara, Cairo, and Tehran refrain from the application of force against each other, the immanent tension between them—manifested mainly by blocking each other's political initiatives in the region—will sideline Israeli issue from the top priorities of their geopolitical agendas.

However, Israel can still damage its promising position by an inexpedient military strike on Iran's nuclear installations in hope of pulling the Western powers into the war such an action would unleash. But the persistence with which President Barack Obama has been trying to convince the leader of the Jewish state to back away from such a move indicates that the West is reluctant to sacrifice its own interests for Israel's.

As for the Arab uprisings, Israel's position in this regard is quite cautious. During all of 2011, Jerusalem officially refrained from sounding its opinion on the Arab revolutions. This was apparently due to the thorough understanding of the destructive consequences the process might entail. As the destabilization of Egypt has strengthened Iran, the fall of the ruling regime in Syria will bring about political chaos near Israel's borders. Moreover, it may strengthen Turkey's influence over Syria and even result in a Turkish military presence in that country—maintained certainly under the pretext of struggling against “Kurdish separatists.”

The Kurdish Issue

This is perhaps the most important and acute problem of the contemporary Middle East. Kurds are indigenous people in these areas (in contrast to Turks, for example) and live compactly in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, where their population reaches twenty million. The Kurds' claims for (at least) autonomy remain unanswered in all these countries except perhaps in Iraq, where a sort of “semi-official” autonomy was received as a result of external (particularly Western) pressure on destroyed Baghdad. It is worth mentioning, however, that Iraq's Kurds are in fact beyond Baghdad's control. It is perhaps for this reason that Iraqi authorities have no objection to frequent Turkish military intrusions into Iraq's territory when pursuing Kurdish fighters.

In effect, neither the international community nor regional states are enthusiastic about opposing the Kurds' oppressions. Hence, it is not difficult to see that the emergence of a new and particularly unruly state is not desirable for either regional countries (which will be forced to cede part of their territories to Kurdistan) or the international community. However, such a possibility is very real. If the re-division of the Middle East gains momentum, Kurds will inevitably create autonomous areas in Syria, Iran, and Turkey (as they did in Iraq). The creation of autonomous areas leading to their unification into an independent state is just one step. Meanwhile, without any traditions of statecraft, a Kurdish state can turn into an uncontrolled and even unpredictable force in the Middle East (with a population exceeding roughly thirty million people). Given such unpromising prospects for the international community, it is hardly plausible that the latter's support to Iraqi Kurds in the creation of autonomy had far-reaching goals of establishing a "Free Kurdistan" as some analysts suggest.¹³ Any support, rather, was aimed at solving a concrete tactical issue: a complete weakening of Iraq and possibly its partition. Does this mean that the international community is not yet ready to place strategic importance on solving the Kurdish issue? It seems so.

Syria

Likewise, the international community currently is trying to solve similar tactical issues in Syria, though it hardly wants to see this country partitioned. Weakening Syria's ruling regime, isolating it, restraining its ability for independent decision-making and therefore carrying out one's own policy in the region—all this is quite desirable for major political actors in the Middle East and the global powers behind them. But this is all they want. Otherwise, the complete destruction of Syria and its partition would give greater leeway for Turkey's geopolitical maneuvers, which is premature and unconstructive, as Ankara has not determined its geopolitical orientation in the Middle East. In other words, Turkey has not yet decided if it will remain the West's strategic partner and therefore oppose Iran seriously or if, as it declares, it will carry out an independent policy aimed at regional leadership. The second option would undoubtedly put Arabs on alert, primarily those in Riyadh and Cairo. They want to weaken Syria and make it their satellite in the unfolding big regional "game," but by no means at the expense of strengthening Turkey.

As the Syrian regime demonstrates steadiness and more importantly a resolve to struggle for the country's unity, the material and financial support reportedly provided by Saudi Arabia to Syrian opposition will shrink. Hence, Turkey may soon be left alone in doing the "dirty work" of adding fuel to the fire of the Syrian uprising, which may pit Ankara against the rest of the Arab world.

Even the Western powers have abandoned the idea of active assistance to the Syrian revolution, let alone consideration of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's regime through military intervention. In effect, with Syria, the West's protest has been confined to diplomatic *démarches* (recalling ambassadors from Damask). The assumption that this might be the result of Russia's and China's positions on Syrian issue is implausible. (Neither Moscow's nor Beijing's nor anyone else's objection shook Washington's determination to attack Iraq in March 2003.) Rather, Western policymakers well understand that further weakening Arab states will strengthen Turks and Iranians. This would not only create a growing geopolitical disparity in the Middle East that may seriously undermine the region's fragile stability, but it could reduce the Western influence over the region significantly. It is perhaps for this reason that the West is currently trying to restore equilibrium between the major powers in the Middle East. If anything, the United States has recently resumed \$1.3 billion in annual military aid to Egypt.¹⁴

Russia's and China's Positions

The final point we would like to touch on is Russia's and in part China's position in Middle Eastern affairs. It would be incorrect to suppose that Russia vetoed the UN Security Council resolution on Syria because Moscow wants to get its debt repaid for arms supplies. Kremlin policymakers well understand that Damascus will hardly ever pay this debt, as it has not paid Egypt, Iraq, and Libya for similar arms supplies. Russia's position is rather demonstrative and expresses its solidarity with the Chinese. Both Moscow and Beijing are striving to demonstrate their resolve and readiness to oppose the "color" revolutions in the zones of their traditional influence, not to mention their own states. This is extremely important for China given the problems with Tibet and the provinces with Muslim populations (namely perpetual separatist tendencies in these areas). So too is the case for Russia, which—along with numerous domestic problems (including the permanently insurgent North Caucasus)—needs to prevent socio-political explosions in the whole post-Soviet space. However, the greatest source of concern for the Russians in this connection is post-Soviet Central Asia. If the Arab-Spring-style revolutions spill over to the Central Asian states, Russian ideologues and politicians argue, Russia will have a number of hostile Islamic states at its southern borders, which are practically unprotected.

However, let us return to the Middle East. It will definitely take much time, if it will ever happen, to unravel the tangle of problems there. This gives rise to perhaps the most important question of our work: are the ongoing processes in the Middle East genuinely aimed at maintaining permanent tension and stimulating insoluble problems in the region? We do not have an answer to this question yet. Perhaps we will after some time. However, history suggests that relative

stability in the Middle East has been achieved solely under the rule of empires, be they Persian, Roman, Arab, Ottoman, or British.

Endnotes

¹ Michael L. Ross, (2001), *Does Oil Hinder Democracy?* [World Politics](#), Volume 53, [Issue 03](#), pp 325 – 361.

² Paula Russo, (2004) *Great Arab Popular Socialist Libyan Jamahyria*, Stable URL: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/caimed/unpan019179.pdf> (accessed on March 10, 2012).

³ Peter Iskanderov (12.26.2011), *Управляемый хаос* (Manageable Chaos), “STOLETIE”, Stable URL: http://www.stoletie.ru/geopolitika/upravljajemyj_khaos_2011-12-26.htm (accessed on March 8, 2012).

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