

## **WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE MIDDLE EAST? RUSSIA'S INTERESTS AND LOGIC OF ACTION IN THE REGION**

**Vitaly Naumkin, President of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences**

Transcript of the meeting of the Triologue Club International

July 5, 2017

**Vitaly Naumkin:** Thank you so much for this beautiful introduction. In the title, itself, we have the answer, if there is some logic in what is going on that means it is good. Of course, logic in the activities of Russia but not in the situation itself. The situation is not logical at all. I am going to be brief because it is a huge region, and everything is evolving and the new conflicts emerge and old frozen conflicts get away because in the situation with the general crisis, we are going to have new emerging activities not just what happened with Qatar.

I will start with Syria because this is the issue closest to me and I have been involved from the very beginning in 2011 as a practitioner and academic. Of course, the Syrian conflict is one of the bloodiest conflicts in this area. In Syria, we are witnessing the situation where Syrian society is split into the segments that are fighting against each other.

One of the segments which is not fully appreciated sometimes by our Western colleagues, is the segment of society loyal to the current government, or as it is sometimes called, *regime*, although our Syrian partners are adamantly against this kind of terminology. In Geneva, we don't use the word *regime*, because Syrian diplomats and our colleagues would automatically turn into our enemies when we start using this kind of terminology.

It does not really matter whether this segment is 30%, 40%, 25%, maybe 55%, but this is the symbol of the belief that the government is the symbol of the country, of the government, of independence, of the unified state. And that segment does exist and is in control of a certain territory. Again, it doesn't matter if it is 20%, 30%, 40% but it is controlling major metropolitan areas of the country. When we are talking about terrorists, they mostly control the territory of the deserts and what is important there are oil fields there, some other resources, and that is it.

Again, it is not even necessary to mention that the humanitarian situation is deteriorating and it is really bad in Syria, although it is not better in Yemen. It is probably even worse in Yemen. But the worst problem, which is especially acute for our European partners is the problem of Syrian refugees. I am not going to give you statistics to save time, you can easily find all those figures on the internet.

Recently we started seeing the light at the end of the tunnel regarding Syria and I am talking about the resolution 2254 of the UNSC, and finally the consensus was reached for the first time and the international community is actively working on the implementation of that

resolution. There are three baskets in that resolution. First, the political transition, second is constitution and third is political elections. Recently the fourth basket was added, antiterrorism, so combatting terrorism.

There are two parallel tracks here. The first track is what defines this light at the end of the tunnel. In Astana, the negotiations are finishing there today. Three countries became united, something seemingly impossible, just a year ago — Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The military and security issues are being discussed. Here we can state that Russia made a serious concession compared with previous positions of our country regarding this conflict — for the first time, Russia came to negotiation table with the heads of those organizations that we consider to be terrorist organizations, but are not recognized as such by UN Security Council. It recognizes two organizations as terrorist — one is Daesh, or the Islamic State and also former Al-Nusrah, and a couple of minor organizations. But Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham are not recognized as terrorist organizations, although to my mind, they are not better than any of the above-mentioned ones. But Russia is negotiating with them, and I think, that this is a very serious political concession.

I remember, I never thought that I would be at the same table with Mohammed Alloush, head of Jaysh al-Islam because his brother and the previous commander was destroyed by Syrian Aviation assisted by our former colleagues of the President of *Triologue Club*, but yet his brother is sitting there negotiating with us.

The second concession was creation of the de-escalation zones. There are four zones in Syria, that was the concession for the sake of dealing with this situation. Again, today is going to be the end of negotiations in Astana, and it looks like an agreement was reached there about two painful issues. One is the determination of the borders of the zones, I am not going to specify those now. And the second issue — who is going to monitor the ceasefire situation? What kind of monitoring mission is going to be created there? Because there should be check points, another painful issue. But, at least, agreements regarding three zones. There is another separate question regarding the South and the border with Jordan and Israel, but that is a separate issue, again. There are lots of problems, lots of different issues, but again here in Astana it is making a slow progress. There was a leak, Americans leaked the information about the closed session of communications between Russian and American military communications in Jordan. There is some kind of information, although it is just leaked information, but there could be a fifth zone created, but we do not know anything about it officially.

There is complicated problem regarding Russian- American contacts, but without Russian-American interaction, it is quite difficult to get any solution. Along with Astana, there is the second parallel track in Geneva where political issues are being discussed regarding these four political baskets. I am going to participate in those negotiations and I am not empowered to say what is going to happen there, so I am not going to get into it here. There are lots of hopes put into the future meeting of Putin and Trump. I am not an optimist regarding the results of these future meetings. The campaign that our American partners are conducting has gone too far. Also, against their own president. You know, Trump's profession was a developer and his business was development. The developers do not have

forward thinking. They have their long thinking. They think about the next 8-10 years. There is not going to be return on investment money tomorrow, you are going to get some money back in 10-15 years when you build a hotel.

I am sure that Trump has some long-term strategies, he is often pictured as the person who is highly emotional and prone to rapid direction, it is not exactly so. The last thing I am going to mention about the U.S. here — when I look at the U.S. I have this impression, that now we witness the start of the new presidential campaign in the U.S. Ivanka is the main person here. It is not exactly a joke, because who knows.

Getting back to Syria, there are two main things here. First, Russia is showing flexibility. Second, Russia has a certain brand of action and is really ready to cooperate with international players and there are some deals where we see certain success in humanitarian areas, and also in ceasefire activities.

Here Russia's position is a single non-divided Syria and this is the same position that is shared by most global and local players. No one wants Syria to be divided. The general vision what Syria is going to be — democratic, nonsectarian, with minority rights respected, everyone knows that. The last thing I wanted to emphasize here, that the task of the Russian military is not just combatting anti-terrorism and supporting the government of the country, but there is a huge task of humanitarian assistance, please don't forget about thousands of tons of humanitarian cargo brought there. Also, participation in negotiations, bringing ceasefire to multiple parties there. The most important thing is not to keep the security zones forever and there should not be permanent partition of the country. But there is potentially real danger.

We should not forget that there is a sponsor of every zone and there are certain American bases in the South and the Southeast, Turkish in the North, there is an ongoing operation to free Raqa mostly carried out by Kurdish Democratic Forces supported by the U.S., and we do not know about future development of this situation. Of course, all of the risks of the democratic forces that is supported by the U.S., which is not only Kurds, but at least half of them is Arab tribes, but the main military force is of course Kurds, the so-called YBG, that is considered to be terrorists by Turkey. Opposition is posing a serious question about presence of Hezbollah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Well, so far, each of the forces, including global ones — Russia and the United States — that are fighting terrorism on parallel tracks, need boots on the ground. For Russia, it is Syrian army, for the US it is Democratic forces and some of the groups in the South that receive quite serious weapons from certain Western players. Northwest province of Idlib which is the place that is stemming with terrorist groups, with radical militants and what is to be done with Idlib which has a common border with Turkey is not quite clear so far.

Now I'm going to jump to the new conflict, the new problem connected to Qatar. We do not have the time to look at the reasons why this conflict suddenly emerged. But it is easy to understand those reasons if you look at those 13 demands to Qatar from a group of Arab states. It is quite clear that the number of accusations to Qatar, regarding supporting

terrorism, could be brought against a number of countries in the Gulf as well. When we are looking at certain arms coming to Syria, some of the terrorist groups received arms weapons from Saudi Arabia and other countries. Even if it wasn't an official level of support, those were private contributions. Still those countries provided support to these terrorist groups.

Qatar, if you look at GDP per capita, it is number one in the world, three American GDPs per capita. Of course, this huge potential which is accumulated in the hands of the ruling family which is sponsoring certain projects which they use to influence this situation in the world. Of course, it is of concern to the neighbors also. The neighbors are looking with great envy, and there are huge sums of money. Qatar is working with everyone, it is quite unique, diversifying political and economic contacts to the highest extent possible. It is one of the main resources for the support for Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world. We should not forget that Muslim Brotherhood is practically Turkey because Mr. Erdogan's party actually has the roots in that group. Of course, that alliance, Turkey and Qatar, well it is quite serious because Muslim Brotherhood for Egypt that is the big enemy, that is a quite disturbing factor for the Emirates. Also, because the influence of the organization was really strong among the tribes in the Emirates, so it is considered to be a serious internal threat.

Russia had all these serious contradictions with Qatar also including issue of Syrian files, and dossiers. Those were quite serious differences especially at the time of Chechen War when Qatar was providing serious support to Chechen separatists. There was a real stronghold of certain terrorist groups there. Maybe you remember when Mr. Yandarbiyev was murdered in Qatar and there was a certain crisis that passed quite rapidly.

At the same time, Qatar is one of the most serious investors in Russian and 17% of Rosneft belongs to Qatar. Also, part of Pulkovo airport in St. Petersburg, there are many other projects that were discussed in the course of the recent months and soon will be implemented. Nothing surprising here, because 20% of British Airways belongs to Qatar, and also 10% of Heathrow Airport in London. There are lots of other investments all over the world, huge investments. CENCOM (Central Command) base is in the territory of Qatar, there are 11,000 American troops.

And now the new Turkish base emerged, and the group of Arab countries demands that that base be shut down, and I will tell you more about it. In these demands they are dealing with the base, and also asking to shut down Al Jazeera International. Also, they have close relations with Iran, and Saudi Arabia is irritated and concerned about it. Especially when we recall President Trump's visit and his anti-Iran rhetoric in Saudi Arabia. In Qatar they believe, that those demands are not acceptable because they are infringing on the sovereignty and the principals of international law.

Now four countries are actually discussing this situation. The four countries that are discussing this ultimatum are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Emirates, and Bahrain. They are discussing possible measures to be taken so that they can put pressure on Qatar in order for Qatar to actually listen to them. I do not think they are going to have this scenario of

military intervention with Qatar. Although there is some talk about these scenarios, I believe that they are not grounded at all.

Nobody wants to have a Turkish-Arab war today. But Turkey will not give up on Qatar, because it will mean losing face for Erdogan, and he does not want to lose face. Maybe for him it is more important than to anybody here today. There are some speculations that bases could be transferred to the Emirates, but again when you use Google Maps, and you look at all the huge investments and many billions invested. All of that could not just be easily abandoned and transferred to the Emirates. What if something problematic starts happening in the Emirates, because at some point there were problems with the partners in Saudi Arabia and the base was transferred to Qatar. I do not think they are going to do it.

But the way, coming back to Saudi Arabia, the situation in Saudi Arabia today is quite complicated. It is clear that there is a severe fight going on in the ruling family. About 7-10 days ago, the son of the king became a hereditary prince instead of a person called "MBN" — Mohammad bin Nayef. Now it is Mohammad bin Salman — "MBS" and also, we "MBZ" — Mohammed bin Zayed in Emirates. So, there are three Mohammad bin — MBN, MBS, and MBZ. So, Mohammad bin Salman is 33 years old, he is quite ambitious and would like to become the king. King Salman is quite ill and MBS now is starting to take more and more powers of ruling the country. This is now creating resistance among the groups in Saudi establishment.

Now because of the lower oil prices, and the catastrophic situation because of the war in Yemen, the standards of livelihood have become lower in Saudi Arabia, although they are quite high; however, they have become lower than before. This also makes the Middle Class irritated.

What Russia is doing here, Russia is as equally close as we are far from all of the countries in the Arabian Peninsula.

Russia is interested in maintaining quite well-balanced relations with all the actors in the situation which is evolving there. We have a wonderful development in our relationship with Egypt, and our relationship is quite close. I already mentioned Qatar and the relations are quite developed. We are interested in a stable Qatar. We also have great relations with the Emirates, not bad with Kuwait, and with Saudi Arabia we came to a new level in our relationship also within the field of combatting terrorism.

I believe that our position is close to the position of the U.S. and Europe, because no one wants destabilization in the Middle East which could lead to catastrophic results. Qatar is interested in slowing down the situation, procrastinating, having long political dialogue regarding the issues they believe are possible to be discussed. Other countries would like more rapid development. Naturally political dialogue is the only mean to find some solutions. Maybe these countries now are more interested in cooperation with us, and the West in combatting terrorist threat. They will be more cautious in supporting any radical groups anywhere.

A couple of words about what is going on in Iraq. There is a quite serious development. Now is the final stage in the liberation of Mosul. It does not mean that Daesh is going to disappear, Daesh would lose the territory, would lose the capital – there are two capitals. The second one in Raqa, where the same thing is going to happen. But still it is very difficult to get to an organization that has tens of thousands of members.

Their strategy is creating new franchises all over the world, in Europe, post-Soviet countries and we are really concerned, Central Asia, Afghanistan and they are organizing cells including sleeping cells. And the members of these organizations, they move everywhere, and again there are tens of thousands of members and this radical ideology is finding support. Also, some of them are going to be protected by tribes. We do not know what this terrorist threat is going to lead to.

Here we have the representative of the Embassy of the Philippines and most recently we had the situation in Mindanao where the terrorist groups participated. There were some groups of ethnic Chechens that came there and were sent there by Islamic State. Nevertheless, this is a positive development in Mosul, but we should not forget about the Kurds and Arabs and this Kurdish factor it has great potential on conflicts because the Kurdish groups are inspired by the opportunities presented.

I have to say a couple words about Yemen and Libya. They are quite complicated countries in the Middle East. In Libya, there is no state after our Western partners quite irresponsibly, and in a silly fashion destroyed the government system in Libya. Now there are three governments and a lot of gang groups and we do not really see any prospects of improvement of the situation. Also, there are not too many prospects in Yemen. The humanitarian situation there is just terrible. International community is looking at what happened in the Northern part of the world. Here are of course separate humanitarian activities, but still the situation is really bad. 50% of the population has Cholera. The situation is really bad, and people just starve. Now, regarding the global role when we are looking at the three countries that are main players. It used to be different countries like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The judges of the Arab world. But now they have problems of their own. Maybe Egypt could play some global role, but there are problems in Egypt. Now there are three non-Arab countries — Israel, Turkey, and Iran. They have this great potential for dynamic development. But there are certain problems in those countries also. Especially in Turkey, after the coup attempt when there was anti Gülen Movement, that movement is no longer as strong as it used to be. I believe that we made a very serious step and it is one of the achievements of Russia, to become closer with Turkey. Also, we have good relations with Israel. Although there is the Palestinian problem, but we have a certain cooperation and friendship. But the fact that Palestinian problem is still unsolved has certain negative potential and lack of desire of Netanyahu government to deal with it is a big minus for him.

Iran became much closer with Russia, although we have different points of view, and in Syria although we have different agendas. Iran is really concerned with the U.S. policy. We are not interested in the escalation of the situation, especially if some steps are made in the U.S. that will hurdle the solution of the Nuclear file, that could be catastrophic.

Iranians are taking into consideration their interests in the Gulf and looking into the situation with Qatar, I believe that they would be ready to take some serious measures. There are a lot of activities of Iranian Navy and Saudi Arabia, and Emirates were going to do something to block Qatar, I do not think Iranians would allow that.

I briefly described everything. In conclusion, I would like to say that Russia would like to interact with all the partners in the Middle East and Russia was quite successful in the developments of the Middle East. It is one of the main players and in some areas the main player. Russia has a real presence in the territory, and when something happens there is always a line of world leaders who would like to come to Moscow to discuss this situation. So, I would like to stop now and get to questions if you have any.

**Question:** Thank you for your presentation. I would like to discuss certain in-depth issues regarding Iran. Now people are talking about this alliance: Turkey, Iran, and Qatar. Do you think that Iran is going to play this new role or, maybe the Arabian Peninsula is going to remain a peninsula and no one will allow Iran to participate in the activities in this area?

**Answer:** You are right to say that here we are talking about the current situation and the alliance is situational. I mentioned already that Iran along with Turkey are the beneficiaries in this situation. To what extent cooperation between them and Qatar are going to be evolving, I believe it is going to be developing. To what extent they could cooperate? We should not forget about Shiite and Sunni differences. But inside Sunni groups those differences could be even worse. But again, we should not forget that Qatar is a Wahhabi state, so the ruling family would not want to lose the trust of the radical conservative groups of their society.

Again, Iran is getting out of the isolation and the latest deal with *Total* regarding natural gas field in the South with real mighty investor can be seen as a spit in the face of Trump. They have been discussing the investment there for so long. And now suddenly France is doing it. Again, if other investors are going to get there notwithstanding American sanctions and threats it would make Iran stronger. The economic situation in Iran is evolving notwithstanding the sanctions which is a good example and if they have good political unity and balance of liberals and conservatives in the country they could have great prospects especially if they are not going to impose their agenda on conservative groups like Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey.

Recently one gentleman from the Saudi family said, “We are not going to calm down until we make some members of the ruling family in Qatar partake in the coup, we are not going to calm down before that, we are going to act.” Also, I discussed similar issues with a man from Qatar also from the ruling family and he said, “We are going to slow down the situation, we are going to procrastinate, we are going to ask international players, the U.S, Russia, and so on”. “And what are you going to do then?” — I asked him, “We are going to wait for the coup in Saudi Arabia”. So, this is the answer to your question.

**Question:** Thank you very much for the really in-depth presentation. Several points that you mentioned that is important for Russia to have good relations with all actors. But of course, even the deep-rooted religious, social and also from the historical, and from the point governance, the differences. Where all the limits of these good relations. And when you come to the limits, where will the priorities be?

**Answer:** Yes, I think you are right there are limits, I think there are political and strategic limits. But we are not interested in competing with the U.S. for providing some ground for military presence. We are not interested in creating same number of bases or protecting countries, treaties like the US is doing and some of their partners. So, we are not doing this with the exception of what we are doing in Syria. It is quite enough, and I do not think there is a long-term strategy of some sort for military presence. On the other hand, a lot of governments are now interested in providing relations with Russia in the realm of security, I do not know how it is going to unfold, but still there is cooperation for the fight against terrorism and some other issues given this dialogue. Most of them are looking at Russia as a stabilizing force especially given that we have a lot of divisions within the Western camp. So, there is more interest in Russia to stabilize the whole situation around these countries. But there are limits, you are right. There are also financial economic limits. Because you know the problems Russia is suffering from, especially given the Western sanctions. But still the main list of countries is improving in terms of investment, as I have mentioned Qatar investment, there are also some other interesting deals with other countries like Turkey and also how it will be with Iran. Israel with less, but some Arab states. But there are limits, financial and economic. Limits related to our absence of ambitions to compete with anyone or replace anyone. If the Kuwait wants to be protected by the U.S. after the first Gulf War they are welcome to but we do not have anything against if they want to be protected. All these bases, Qatar, and so on so forth. But even given that there is a U.S. base, there are even some countries in the Gulf that are thinking in terms of U.S. conspiracies, the most popular tune abroad is conspiracies against the Middle East, the colonial past is dictating Western conspiracies, divide and rule and so on and so forth. More frequently now we are hearing these accusations or conspiracies, that somebody is going to divide, or to destroy these countries. With the success of these fights in Iraq, you know, Iraq is on the brink of not collapse but partition. So, in general I think you are right, there are lines, but at the same time we are moving step by step towards better relations with countries and more and more role. We are interested in more roles and participating in a new thing I think, foreign policy. More and more interested in dealing with different actors in Libya. Thinking about problems and trying to reconcile different factions, working mostly with European states who have experience — Italy, France, some others, and United States. But still.

**Question:** Thank you so much for your in-depth analysis, we have a more structural approach this way to what is going on in the region, but I would like to ask you to tell us more about the situation in Libya in more detail, because we have scarce information regarding what is going on there. So please tell us.

**Answer:** In our institute, we actually publish a lot of brochures on the current situation in many different countries and we actually just recently published one on Libya and there is a lot of information there. I mean I could tell you what is there, but that would take me at least two hours. We are going to give you this brochure. It is a very complicated issue. There are three governments there, one is in Tripoli, there are Islamic forces there and just recently the United Nations Special Envoy just recently organized a national Unity government which does not really control the country. Although Sarraj, which is head of the government came to Russia, we had certain contacts. Also, there are contacts with General Haftar, it is quite a mighty military force but they do not control the situation in the West of the country and some Western players say that we are trying to create Haftar as the new Qaddafi, it is not exactly so. Also, we should not figure out Haftar is an old man and it is quite difficult for him to control the whole country. There is a certain role of Egypt and Libya, they want to contain Muslim Brotherhood, the Emirates have different plans there. Again, every little group would like to have some kind of international sponsor, and although they have oil, but there are certain difficulties in transportation/extraction, upstream/downstream difficulties and again Qatar is quite a mighty player there, but they are just becoming an anti-Egypt force and support Muslim Brotherhood. What is Russia trying to do? Russia is oriented at bringing peace to all the parties, and all the parties coming somehow together. Although it is not impossible to find consensus now, it is highly improbable.

**Question:** My question is about Syria. At the beginning, you said Syrian society is divided into 2 segments...

**Answer:** No! More than 2 segments

**Question:** ...yes, two segments would be two simple. My question is if now in the last days of the war against Daesh, if the situation in Syria can be simplified in the sense that is just Assad against Daesh. So, what kind of role is left to the other opposition also in terms of political aspirations. And then, it is interesting that on the second of July the Syrian government have issued new bank notes and the most popular bank notes have a portrait of Assad. So, does it pave the way for the move, the regional transition. Could you elaborate on this? Thanks.

**Answer:** Well when we look at Resolution 2254, there is this idea about political solution, so there is also the Geneva communique in the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2012 about transitional Government body. Of course, many believed that this Geneva communique is somewhat outdated. Resolution 2254 with again a moderate opposition Russia is contacting with the moderate opposition and the visitors come to Moscow all the time. Those are representatives of military and political groups and again HNC that tried to monopolize the role of all the groups it was graded in ARIAD. It is all getting political transition DGB, and the ideas was Assad was going to lead the country with certain guarantees that this certain transitional body will be there for 6 months, and then the constitution, then the elections, in 17 months. That is why the HNC, this idea that Assad must go tomorrow is unacceptable. You cannot simply negotiate this. This is why I stress the importance of Loyalists. If you are negotiating with them, they are not able to accept. You need some strategy for the

smooth transition and allow Syrians to decide for themselves who is going to rule them. So, resolution 2254 they identified some other groups as well. Moscow Group and Cairo Group identified in the resolution, two groups of opposition. And also, there are other groups. So, it means that there should be some other groups, that will represent the Moderate opposition. So, it was very difficult everywhere, and in Geneva as well, there were attempts by Staffan de Mistura to make them sit together and probably to create one body umbrella with all the groups. But they cannot come together under the leadership under the HNC, because they do not trust each other.

The first time, there are some, the main element of the last six round in May they managed to sit together at the level of technical experts. So, I think the talks are still proximity talks. The main goal is to organize direct talks. It is not possible now. Proximity talks, this format is working. And for the first time there is some prospect of bringing together some groups of the opposition. And the opposition is divided, very much divided. And the HNC is not controlling the situation. There are groups, different groups, armed groups, and different important people outside the country. Although they are not fighting with Assad some of them are helping. Some important Syrian billionaires are helping with the opposition and who have some ambitions, they are awfully wealthy and there are smart Syrians outside of the country. Brazil, has substantial Syrian community, they have about 5 million Brazilians of Syrian origin and several million of Lebanese origin. All in all, 12 million people out of, I do not know, two hundred and four million of Brazilians, and substantial positions in business, government, parliament, and everywhere. So, Latin America is really important and there are a lot of wealthy people who care about Syria, and the same about Europe. There are some important businessmen in Britain, France, and the United States, even playing some political role.

The political transition will be much more focused on some sort of transition plan based on the basis on the power sharing. I think it can happen, but we need secession of hostilities to prevent the emergence of new wave of killings and atrocities. The situation is much better in the realm of the humanitarian situation and ceasefire.

**Question:** Thank you so much for this insightful speech. I have two questions. You have mentioned about the post-world creation of the de-escalation zone in the South. Could you please elaborate more on this? Is there any progress in the discussions among Russia?

**Answer:** I do not know. I said that it is closed format and there was a leak that are contexts, but I do not know anything about that.

**Question:** Second question then. To what extent is Russia committed to Assad being at the top. Is it Russia, or is it Assad, or regime that Russia is supporting? Thank you so much.

**Answer:** No, it is not Assad. We do not care about Assad personally, but it is up to the Syrians to decide who is better to rule them as I said. As of now, Assad is a legitimate, in the view of Russia, a legitimate president Head of State in Syria. So, he is someone with whom you deal. Even our American partners who when they were negotiating and signing agreement about elimination of chemical weapons it was done with the government of Mr.

Assad. Not with anyone else. Not with the opposition. There is a regime. If the regime is represented in the United Nations, it is a legitimate government. You cannot say, "Oh this government is not legitimate." It is legitimate, it is recognized by the international community. What can you do about it? And as I said there is a certain loyalist segment of the Syrian society even those who believe that the country can survive only if Assad is remaining in his palace.

We do not care about who is going to be there, but we are in favor of international law. International law demands implementation of these Security Council resolutions. So, do not think Russia is praising Assad for whatever he is doing. There have been a lot of pressures on the government, on Assad and the terms of essential rights, and political prisoners, and a lot of other things. He is not an easy partner. We are not dictating to Assad what to do and what not to do. It is a very tough government, a very tough president with his own vision on what to do. But in the terms of preserving Syria as a unitary state, it is significant to deal with this government. So, we are supporting this government in order to preserve state institutions, to preserve the Syrian army as the main force which is fighting against the terrorists. We analyzed the mistakes which had been done by our partners in Iraq, where everything has been destroyed and still cannot be rebuilt so easily given the potential of the Iraqi army. There was the situation when the Ba'ath party was dissolved and some of the most active elements in the army and in the government went to the Islamic State. So, most of the main commanders of Daesh are former officers of Saddam Hussein's army. So, to preserve the military institutions, to preserve state institutions of Syria is a goal for any sort of transition. It does not mean we stick with Assad, if there is a transition based on some power sharing, so it will be, in my view, the best solution. But nobody is saying that Assad is a long life president of Syria. No one is saying this.

**Question:** You pointed out to the strength of ISIS ideology. You pointed out Mindanao. My questions are a bit more to the most populated Muslim state, Indonesia. How far do you see the potential of ISIS spreading to Indonesia and infecting the community there? And if there is potential, who would be a partner in fighting this radical situation?

**Answer:** Good question. So, we have good specialists on Indonesia in my institute. What I know, I think, that given that the main Islamic parties: Sufi order in Indonesia are very tolerant, controlling the main part of the situation given it is a democratic state, and its big economic potential. More or less, good living standards in comparison to some other countries. I think that the living standard is not as dangerous as, for instance, needed to think about some specific strategy, especially the use of forces. I do not think so. I think that Jemaah Islamiyah and some other groups are not as dangerous. If we analyze who is coming to Syria and Iraq to fight. I do not know who is going coming from Indonesia, probably there are one, two, three fighters. So, it demonstrates that there are not plenty of sympathizers in Indonesia than from Bosnia, or some other European countries. There are many more fighters with European passports in big numbers, but not from Indonesia.

**Question:** Thank you very much for the interesting presentation. In terms of Qatar, was this something that you expected, in terms of the reactions of the decisions made by Soviet, Emirates, and others. Or did this come as a surprise? Was there anything in particular that

triggered it to happen right now, as oppose to anything that is new, it has been there for some time that. But what triggered them to take these actions.

**Answer:** Good question. I can confess that it has not been anticipated to explode in such a quick manner, but it was not unexpected. The situation was very tense in that relationship, and it was triggered, I think, by the Iranian factor and also, not exactly by the visit from Mr. Trump, but by the support and his line which is very anti-Iranian, it helped Saudi Arabia in opening this new front after Yemen. Probably it is a sort of diverting attention from Yemen to this new front, and there are certain calculations of these parties against Iran — one. Against the Muslim Brotherhood — two. Against terrorists — three. And there is some practical consideration because the Qatari money is a source of attraction. If they want compensation, one of the demands is to pay compensation to the states. So, this huge amount of money reserves, even the worsening economic situation in Saudi Arabia is one of the factors. The general atmosphere in the crisis of statehood, the mere concept of nation states where everyone is afraid of possible collapse, partition, change of borders and everything, it is the whole atmosphere that helps create or exacerbate existing tensions.

**Question:** My question is with regard to Israel. I would like to hear your view about what explains extremely cautious reserved attitude of Israel vis-à-vis the world surrounding him, the burning Middle East. Why is Israel behaving like we do see it?

**Answer:** Thank you. I think that for Israel, the main challenges are Hezbollah and Iraq. The worsening of the situation, the weakening of the Arab States is looked upon in Israel as a factor that is working towards to the interests of Israel. For instance, Syria has been regarded as one of the main adversaries, does not exist as a threat. Terrorism is in the view of strategic thinkers in Israel is pretty much under control. I think with the exception of the presence of Hezbollah and Iran in the South of Syria. Also, the situation in the Sinai, I think they do not care. They do not see any threats to their security. They think they are self-protected. Continuing building on new settlements which is frustrating for the international community, but nobody, for instance, uses sanctions against Israel because they understand that there is total support by Mr. Trump. It is probably the most pro-Israeli government in the history of the United States. It is an encouraging factor in favor of the present Israeli government which is also facing some internal huge struggles. So as far as Sinai is concerned, efforts to work together with Saudi Arabia which is coming closer to Israel step-by-step. There are some various channels of communication, those Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and to contain this terrorist potential in Sinai which is most disturbing to Israel and Egypt. The situation in Gaza is sort of concern but not a concern for Israeli government. If Hamas is going to be defeated within the realm of the Qatari crisis, because one of the conditions was to expel Hamas leadership and the Muslim Brotherhood. So, Israel is one of the main beneficiaries, and they think that they are well secured.

**Question:** You pointed to Hezbollah, and my question is: How far do you think Iran can control Hezbollah which has its own agenda of course. If it is too strong pro-Israel might have a counter reaction which may destabilize exactly what you have been coining at. Thank you.

**Answer:** Yes, I believe that Iran is not 100% controlling Hezbollah. Hezbollah is rightfully mentioned, has its own national means and agenda and is determined to continue the struggle in Syria to support the government; despite huge losses. So, the estimation is that they have lost about 2,000 fighters, most experienced skillful fighters in Syria, and about 5,000 are wounded. But they are still determined to sustain their threshold in the popular base. They are determined to continue because it is their strategy. The Iranians have nothing to do with that. Of course, they are close to supporting. The Israelis are watching. The main watch of Israelis is to prevent supplies of arms to Hezbollah. So, that is why they are from time to time striking different facilities in Syria not on the same as the government of Assad, but to prevent the accumulation of weapons by Hezbollah. As you know, even for a very irritating factor in the crisis of Qatar. One of the reasons why it exploded you know when Hezbollah was described by Qatar as a factor of government. It was very unusual for a country which is Wahhabi Muslim Brotherhood and so on and so forth to say that Hezbollah is not an enemy but a friend which was probably the last drop that helped explode in such a quick manner.

**Evgeny Buzhinskiy:** Thank you so much, I am not going to take much of your time because time is running out. I would like to thank once again the member of the Academy of Sciences Mr. Naumkin for this comprehensive review of the situation in the Middle East. And I am sure that in the next months and maybe even longer it will be the top news and the matter to be discussed by diplomats and the military. Thank you very much.

Well notwithstanding, July and August is the time of vacations, summer. Unfortunately, Moscow is not much of a summer. But I feel like in the term of international events it is going to be a really hot summer. I'm sure that in the next few months in the future something is going to happen in Ukraine especially because the *Party of War* in Ukraine, is not happy with the situation. Not happy is maybe an understatement.

Also, some of our Ukrainian politicians are going to conduct a military parade in Moscow after they conquer the capital of Russia and put their flag above the Kremlin. Nevertheless, maybe they are going to somehow regulate the situation it all depends on the possible agreements between the United States and Russia, because of course we respect the European intermediaries: Germany and France. But, the *Party of War* in Ukraine is actually relying on American support not European support. I am really concerned about the momentum of the U.S.-Russian relations because we are encountering this great extent of Russo-phobia. It is the coming from the U.S. Senate and a bit less in Congress.

Even in my favorite area of arms control when counting alarming trends because in American Senate they are talking louder and louder about leaving the treaty on Intermediate range missiles. Of course, six months ago, I thought that nothing of the kind could happen with our INF Treaty, but now if something happens the next one is START III and the provisions of the treaty are followed by the parties, and quite well. If the chain reaction happens START III wouldn't really survive. It is amazing and actually professionals in the State Department and actually Pentagon, for them, professionally to leave Russia out of control in this arms control issues are unthinkable. Although, the situation is evolving in this direction. Nevertheless, let's remain optimistic and the presidents of the two countries

*Transcript of the meeting of the Trialogue Club International  
July 5, 2017*

are going to come to some kind of agreement about something the day after tomorrow. I can't really mention the agreement that they can reach, but maybe they could agree on something. I would like to stop now, thank you for coming here, thank you for the participation in our club, and see you in the future.