



CIGS Yevgeny Satanovsky Seminar

“The Middle East Knot”

(Summary)

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Mr. Yevgeny Satanovsky, President, Institute of the Middle East: The Institute for the Middle Eastern studies is not part of any state. The views expressed in this presentation are the personal views of myself and not part of the Russian government.

One of the main challenges when examining the Middle East is that conflicts are often gray, with no clear good or bad players. Terrorist organizations now have access to an unprecedented amount of funds, with the Islamic State acquiring over 3 billion dollars a year in support. Another challenge is the question of leadership in the Middle East, while leaders such as Saddam Hussein and Bashar Assad are considered dictators and undesirable, factional tribalism emerges when they fall and so do refugee crises as exemplified by the current refugee crisis that is spilling over into Europe.

These factors will have implications for Russia and the world order. As a result of the refugee crisis, a new global will shall emerge from the post-Cold War order. Russia has already begun to upend this order as exemplified by its unilateral dispatch of troops to Syria. The period when every country and every regime in the world can be destroyed only when the major powers decide this regime must be destroyed has come to an end. This stands in contrast to the past when the red line for Russia was usually drawn at the former territories of the Soviet Union. There will be consequences for Russia's actions in the future as there is a large and significant Islamic presence in Russia, particularly in the Central Asian areas. Furthermore, the former Soviet Central Asian countries still maintain strong ties with Russia and the citizens of these countries do not even need visas to visit Russia.

There are four countries now which organize international terrorist groups and pay for the international terrorist groups that have posed problems for Russia. The first is Saudi Arabia, which is believed to have played a hand in training the organizer of the Nord-Ost siege. Pakistan has funded terrorist activities in the Central Asian countries that border Russia. Qatar possesses a threat by funding Islamist activities in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, Turkey has played a role in the rise of the Islamic State.

The question then remains – what is Russia to do about these activities. The prevailing idea is to cease ruining regimes that are more or less stable. For example, while Saddam Hussein imposed a terrible dictatorship upon the people of Iraq, there was at least stability. There was also no slave trade and there was no genocide of Yazidis, Christians, and other minorities. The problem is that if we destroy dictatorship regimes, who controls the military technique of a Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein? Often it is violent and radical terrorist groups that impose even harsher regimes.

Russia has drawn upon the lessons it learned in its war against Afghanistan in its presence in Syria. Russia has been engaged in only a limited presence and has used only a very limited number of personnel and only a maximum of 70 aircraft and helicopters. Another important factor is the budget, which is about \$800 million a year. That means that the Russians do not give money to terrorist organizations to make certain cities free from terrorists, which was done by the United States in Fallujah, Ramadi, and just now in Mosul. Another important factor is that Russia works in close tandem with local sheiks and local tribal governments. Russia's stance is, if government forces are not attacked, the leaders will gain full technical support, electricity first and foremost. Governments are going to give education and medical support to the local areas and all the security in the villages and cities is in local hand. Around 1000 villages and cities on Syrian territory and 70 military groups are participating in this.

Russia first started to do this in Afghanistan, which was very successful with the local tribes, and later employed it in Chechnya. There are no more Chechen wars and many of the Chechens have integrated into the Russian establishment and society. While it is arguable that the Chechnya of Kadyrov is not a democracy, it is preferable to have this type of dialogue and integration of Islamic areas all over the country rather than a long-term war with elements of genocide on both sides.

Russia has made efforts to organize the future of Syria, future of Assad, and the future of its joint venture in the war with terrorists with the United States. It all came to absolutely zero at the end, which means Kerry made promises that he was unable to deliver. The US met with leaders of terrorist groups together with the Institute's British scholars in London about 3 weeks ago. Many of the terrorist groups had conflicts over signatures and naming and asserted that they didn't want to stop attacking the Assad's army. However, although Russia has many disagreements with its American colleagues in terms of leadership, but on the ground level, it still has good and professional contact and cooperation with the US military. It is evident that the US does not desire war with Russia.

Russia had a deep conflict with President Erdogan when Turkey attacked Russian aircraft around Syria. However, I believe President Erdogan understood that these sorts of attacks will cost him too much, and relations between Putin and Erdogan have normalized. In terms of Turkey's role in the Syrian conflict, President Erdogan recently attacked the Kurds in Northern Syria. This action does not stand in opposition to the Assad regime. In fact, Assad is very pleased that Erdogan attacked Kurds. There is on the security level, excellent coordination between Damascus and Ankara.

In terms of the role of China, the Chinese decided that they will also send commandos and the military trainers to assist the Assad regime Syria. This was decided upon at the Communist Party level by looking at Russia's example. There are a few hundred of Uighurs who train on the Syrian-Iraqi territory, which is much cheaper and easier and much better for the Chinese security than to stop them on the Chinese territory, especially because Turkey gave these Uighurs the Turkish passports at the Turkish embassies in Indonesia and in Taiwan. That is the specific reason that China desires to be a part of the anti-terrorist campaign in Syria.

While the future of Iraq is uncertain, there is a center of anti-terrorist campaign coordination organized by Russia, Iran, Damascus, and the officials in Baghdad. The interesting thing is that Russia checks and uses all the modern technical equipment which it possesses, which has, in turn, lessened the possibility of military conflict between it and NATO due to deterrence. That is significant given Russia's relations with the United States for the last 25 years. However, it must be noted that the biggest player in the whole region will be China.

There is serious competition on the question of navy and aircraft bases between the Iranians, Saudis, Turks, and Emiratis on the western part of the Indian Ocean. The Iranians' need this corner of Western Africa for the sake of their nuclear program and have into conflict with the Saudis on the Comoros Islands and with the UAE in Eritrea. In addition to Eritrea, the UAE has been spreading its influence in Somali and Yemen. Turkey will organize two bases in the Indian Ocean. One base it desires is in Mogadishu and the other one is in Qatar, which has led to disputes with Saudi Arabia.

There is an Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi Arabian alliance against Ethiopia at the present. The biggest power project in Ethiopia on the Blue Nile managed by China poses a danger for Egypt. If this project is realized, it must start next year. Over the next 6 years, Egypt will lose 30% of its water and 40% of its electricity, because the Nile's water in Egypt comes from the Blue Nile, and not from White.

China is also ready to be a superpower in the Indian Ocean area and not only in this area, but with three in the future in Northern Australia, Gwadar which is in Pakistan, and a naval base in Bangladesh. In addition, China has plans for a few African countries such as Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, and South Africa.