This Year's Major Shock Waves that Rippled the Middle East

The departing year has not been easy for the Middle East. Devastating conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen have resulted in multiple causalities, destruction and a new flood of refugees.

Mostly these events are linked to the policies of the West that, while sanctimoniously preaching against extremism, in reality, uses radical Islamic organizations to achieve its mercenary aims in order to boost its influence. The previously mentioned conflicts offer quite a few examples of such policies in action. Despite vigorous efforts by Russia, Turkey and Iran to resolve the conflict in Syria, this process is not moving forward as quickly as it should and we would like. The situation is quite similar in other conflict zones.

Unfortunately, based on the current state of affairs, we can hardly hope that next year will be more successful.

The recent speech, given by the Egyptian President, is notable in this regard. In it, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi talked about the fact that the Arab Spring had been full of good intentions, but in the end hindered the development of the country. An enormous feat accomplished by the Egyptian Army was the decisive defeat of the pro-Islamic forces in the nation, but still terror attacks have continued up to date. And, in the meantime, Egyptian political scientists have been discussing, with a great deal of concern, the unrelenting level of radicalism in the country. According to their research, there are more and more supporters of the ideology to “protect Islam worldwide”.

Until recently, another North African country, Tunisia, had been portrayed as one of the most striking examples of its victorious democratic reforms. Nowadays, at a time when the ruling secularist party Nidaa Tounes has practically splintered, Tunisians have been increasingly voicing their concern about the future of their nation, especially considering the fact that the terrorist organization Daesh (banned in Russia) ranks included several thousands of
inhabitants of Tunisian cities. The economic situation in Tunisia also leaves much to be desired, as the unemployment rate exceeds 15%, inflation is at 8%, and labor unions have recently staged one of their biggest general strikes and are threatening to organize new labor protests.

Not much optimism can be expressed about the current situation in Saudi Arabia. The US media outlets, at the behest of the Turkish government, have been accusing the crown prince of the Kingdom, Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, of personally ordering the assassination of the opposition Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, at the Saudi Arabian consulate general in Istanbul. It is also well known that in Saudi Arabia itself, leaflets are being handed out with demands for Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud to leave his post (earlier, several members of the Royal family had already expressed their displeasure at the fact that he, having outmaneuvered the other contenders, received the title of the crown prince).

If one follows US media reports attentively, it will become clear that the fate of the crown prince of Saudi Arabia has become a bargaining chip in the battles between the Republicans and Democrats. And the Democrats are openly demanding that Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud be replaced with another politician. They are not doing this out of concern for the Kingdom, but instead with the aim of causing the most harm to President Donald Trump, who has, on numerous occasions, expressed his solidarity with the crown prince, and has emphasized that the relationship with Saudi Arabia is a priority for Washington. It is noteworthy that several US newspapers are openly appealing for the crown prince of Saudi Arabia to be replaced by another member of the Royal family.

Observers in the Arab world think that the ongoing, nearly 2-year conflict between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE + Bahrain has in fact paralyzed the work of the Gulf Cooperation Council. A recently held summit of this organization showed that there are still disagreements within its ranks. According to Arab newspapers, King Salman personally signed the invitation to the summit, addressed to the Emir of Qatar, but still the Qatari delegation was headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In addition, political scientists highlight the unique stance of the Sultanate of Oman, whose leader, the Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said, hosted the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, in the capital Muscat at the end of October (before this visit, Israeli leaders were banned from visiting the Gulf monarchies).

Nature, just like politics, strives for balance. The state of affairs in the Arab-Israeli conflict was abruptly upset this past year by the actions taken by the Trump administration, which challenged not only Arabs, but the whole Muslim world by declaring Jerusalem to be the capital of Israel and making the decision to move the US embassy there (it is public knowledge that the charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation states that its headquarters should be in Jerusalem). Such a pro-Israeli shift in the Middle East policy of the US evokes criticism even from American politicians.

Hence, it is worth mentioning a report published at the beginning of December 2018, in connection with these developments, which contains sensible ideas on how to resolve the issues in the Gaza strip, whose population is continuing to experience tremendous difficulties. The Brookings Institution and the Center for a New American Security, two Washington think tanks, have released a report entitled “Ending Gaza’s perpetual crisis”. It offers practical and all-encompassing solutions to put an end to the economic warfare and the cycle of violence, and contains recommendations on how to stop the humanitarian crisis in Gaza; to establish a foundation for a functioning economic system, and to, at the same time, work on a political resolution (the authors of the report note that Washington cannot exert efforts to this effect by itself, considering its limited influence and the relations with Palestinians).

It is significant that almost at the same time the United Nations General Assembly rejected a resolution, proposed by the United States, which contains an appeal to condemn Hamas.

Against this grim backdrop, negotiations, which had started in Sweden at the beginning of December, on finding a peaceful resolution to the Yemeni Civil War seem quite promising, especially after all the inhumane trials and suffering that the Yemeni population has had to endure over the last few years. At the moment, the parties are discussing the next round of negotiations in Sweden in January 2019.

Clearly, much in the future will depend on how the events in Syria and Iraq will unfold, where the peace resolution process is gaining steam. According to some political observers from Beirut, the destructive policies by the USA are hindering resolution of these conflicts.

Hence, many Arab analysts have pinned their hopes of establishing stability in the region on actions taken by Russia,
whose reach in the Middle East at present even exceeds the influence of the former USSR.

In such time, the increasingly more constructive role of the United Arab Emirates also stands out, as, this year, they have signed the Moscow Declaration of Strategic Partnership.

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