On the military-political situation in the Middle East

The events of the so-called "Arab Spring" have demonstrated that the Middle Eastern nation-states are experiencing the demise of their existence which is being accompanied by mass uprisings and civil wars.

Arab nationalism was the romantic anti-colonial movement of the army elites, who had received education and upbringing in the West and the Soviet Union and who believed sincerely that the establishment of state institutions based on the European model would ensure for the population of the Arab world not only getting closer to the level of life of developed states but also establishing the relations of justice and social equality. However, the army romanticists did not understand that, unlike in Europe and the USSR, tribal and clan relations prevailed in the region, and, therefore, there were no conditions for bourgeois or communist revolutions. Therefore, the striving of Nasser, Qaddafi, Hussein and Assad-senior, and their political heirs – Ali, Mubarak and Assad-junior – for etatism and secularism was profoundly alien to the population, and the Arab "street" in these countries was putting up with it while there was global confrontation between Washington and Moscow, who were funding and arming their supporters.

With the collapse of the bipolar world, Arab nation-states have lost their way. The consequence of this was a lessening of attention to the region, as the field of geopolitical rivalry, on the part of the USA and Western countries, which, being carried away by the implementation of the project to create the Broader Middle East based on the model of Western democracy, made a strategic misjudgement consisting in the fact that new players - radical Islamists led by Saudi Arabia and Qatar – had entered into the game. As a result, in 2011, the region was swept across by the wave of the "Arab revolutions", which, in Libya and Syria, had the form of a civil war between the armed opposition and the ruling regime. However, the organisers of the popular uprisings, having destroyed the nation-states, clearly proved to be unable to propose to the Arab world any constructive programmes to alleviate pressing social problems. At the same time, in those Arab states where, for decades, people had been accustomed to living in a secular state, there emerged an active counter-response to the spread of the Wahhabi model of the organisation of society – the model characteristic of the main "integrators" of the Arab world. This indicates that the project of Doha and Riyadh for the creation of a "new Caliphate" has been postponed until better times come along, and the region is going to have the fate of "broader Arab Somalia" – a territory of uncontrollable chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, a source of terrorism and extremism, where there will be continuous inter-tribal clashes in the struggle for natural resources.

In the world where the priority of international law has ceased to be an unconditional and indisputable truth, it is an ungrateful matter trying to talk the potential aggressors out of the attack on Syria through diplomatic statements. But Russia will have to fight for Syria because this is a test for its geopolitical capabilities in the foreign policy arena, and the indicator showing that it knows how to use them protecting its interests. And the stakes are quite high here. Syria and Iran are objectively resisting the establishment of a single Middle Eastern Sunni Caliphate threatening the national security of Russia.
If the aggression of the USA and its NATO allies is carried out, this will have grave consequences for the entire region. The Syrian army is one of the most powerful in the Middle East, hence that will entail serious losses on the part of the attacker. The military conflict ignited by the aggressors will spread across the entire Middle Eastern region. It will involve Iran, the Hezbollah movement and Palestinian groups. Israel, Turkey and the United States’ bases in the region will be subjected to military strikes. But the retaliatory strikes will primarily have an asymmetrical nature – activities of subversive groups, terrorist acts which may take place not only in the region, but also in the countries of Europe.

The whole Arab world is closely following the position of the Kremlin in the conflict determining the degree of Russia’s participation in the regional policy and evaluating it as a serious ally in the future.

Another aspect of the situation is that the Americans do not know exactly the actual ability of the Syrian air defence to reflect an air strike. The losses of the allies’ aviation, when carrying out strikes on Syria, may become an unpleasant surprise for the attacker. Besides, it is not clear whether there’s going to be, and of what force, a missile strike by Iran on Israel and the American bases in the Middle East. And if this happens, it will mean the beginning a full-scale war across the whole region.

But the war in the Middle East can pay substantial dividends not only to the arms companies of the West. According to analysts of the French bank Société Générale, world oil prices can increase to 150 dollars per barrel. This trend is indicated by the fact that, with the pending military operation, the price of Brent-brand oil has already increased to 115-117 dollars. However, if strikes on Syria are carried out, no one knows how long the increased oil prices will last and what official Damascus’s ally Tehran is going to do as it has a wide range of alternative strategies in its arsenal: from showcasing its military might to closing the Strait of Hormuz, and missile strikes on Israel.

We should also bear in mind that, for the initiators of the strike on Syria, the increased oil prices can lead to a further deepening of the financial and economic crisis, a decline in the economy of the EU countries, and they can also force some European states, for example, Greece, into default.

*Vladimir Karyakin, Candidate of Military Sciences, senior research fellow at the Department of Defence Policy at the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies. The article was written exclusively for the online magazine New Eastern Outlook.*