

## **THE MIDDLE EAST: BACK TO BASICS**

*Marat Yuldashev*

*Expert with experience in the financial services sector in Cyprus and CIS as well as private consulting in East Europe, CIS and the Middle East*

The region of the Middle East is supplying us with top news headlines practically on daily basis, and unfortunately, most of them are of tragic nature. The frequency and scale of information coming from the region is so massive and diverse that many simply no longer follow them, and those who do discuss and focus only on the "latest" news. The same applies to experts and commentators on TV and the radio, whom we also have in abundant supply.

Without being a trained expert on the Middle East but having an experience of working in the "neighbourhood", I conducted a small personal experiment recently – I picked a couple of "respectable" international editorials (although, I am in doubt what is the criteria and how to measure "respect" to all forms of media content supplies nowadays), and checked their news lines, commentaries and analysis columns on the region for one month, and then tried to see what kind of picture of the region this barrage of information creates for an average reader.

The result, in general, met my expectations – it was total confusion. The content is dominated by description of the most recent events accompanied by reactions from officials, and diverging expert opinions of what to expect or what should be done in the coming days or, maximum, weeks by the main actors. Commentaries from the officials and quoted experts (including columns in the "analysis" category) leave the impression that everyone is focused only on the short-term and pre-occupied with the immediate situational micromanagement.

I very much hope that this is only the impression created by the media, and those who make decisions in the region and beyond, do have well trained and experienced expert teams, who provide solid advice, develop and try to implement medium and long term strategies. Although, series of actions undertaken by some regional and global actors from time to time leave the taste of spontaneity, adventurism, personal ego of the leaders and dangerous gambling without clear logic and goal.

On the other hand, developments unravelling in other parts of the world demonstrate similar behavioural patterns (though with much less blood and human tragedy), and therefore, perhaps, everything we witness today across the Middle East should be put into global and historical context. And all that gambling and adventurism is a sign of growing uncertainty and anxiety, which in turn stems from the crisis of the whole global model

– the model, which broadly speaking, was in place since the end of the WW2, and which is now reaching its expiration date in front of our eyes.

We do not know how the new world will look like but it is clear already now that the Middle East will be one of those regions, which will be re-shaped most dramatically as a result, and it is the broader Middle East due to its geographic, religious, economic, and hence, geopolitical centrality as the main “crossroads” of the planet will be affecting the rest of the world in the ways most unpredictable - the Middle East, which is the connecting point between Europe, Asia and Africa, the birthplace of three world religions as well as major oil and gas region on the planet.

The Oriental wisdom says that when you are lost and do not know which way to go, you should come back to where you started. In other words, if one tries to figure out which forces going to shape developments and long-term future of the region in this environment of information glut and barrage of short-term expert opinions, one should go back to fundamentals – factors which do not change with personalities or electoral cycles.

There are many ways to look at the world but geography, religion, ethnicity and economy are still the main long-term defining factors. Our reality is not shaped by slogans, wishes or promises but rather by constraints and limitations, which we cannot overcome – we cannot change geography, most of us cannot betray faith we belong to and give up ethnicity we were born into, and limited available economic resources dictate that we can go only that far.

The unravelling chaos of the Middle East is the dramatic manifestation of these fundamental factors – factors, which no political leader or government policy can cancel or change. These factors rather shape the logic and patterns politicians and governments forced to pursue, no matter their personal wishes or rhetoric, or electoral slogans and promises.

And this is how we have to look at the fundamentals shaping the geopolitical reality we are living in.

The ongoing crisis of the Middle East has several fault lines, which over-cross and mutually enhance each other, making the situation ever more complex and explosive. And despite the fact that problems of each country in the region differ from others and we should avoid generalization, nevertheless, arguably there is one issue, which is common for the whole of the Middle East – it is the IDENTITY CRISIS, which is manifesting itself simultaneously along several fault lines:

- clash between modernity and conservatism
- clash between religion and the nation state
- clash between ethnicity and nationality

These multiple internal fault lines, which cross each country in the region are both the result of past social-economic and political failures in case of some countries, and the manifestation of evolution in search of self in case of the others.

And all these internal crises are dramatically aggravated by never-ending competing foreign interests and interventionism driven by the region's geographic and economic importance mentioned earlier. Simultaneously, this foreign military and economic activism clashes with ambitions and competition of regional players, each overburdened by its own multiple internal crises along the fault lines I have just mentioned.

As a result, we've got a crisis of enormous depth, complexity and magnitude, and sometimes even absurdity, where regional or international players cooperate in some areas, and wage proxy wars against each other in other areas. For example, according to the estimates of some Western think tanks on the Middle East, there are no less than 12 (twelve) overlapping wars being waged in Syria today, where Assad loyalists fighting rebels, ISIS and Turkey, Iran is fighting against Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turks fighting Kurds, Sunnis against Shias, Russians and Iranians indirectly fighting Americans, and at the same time Iran cooperates with the US in neighbouring Iraq against ISIS, and the list goes on.

One would wonder when all this will end? I am afraid, we have no good news in that department for the foreseeable future. Once a seasoned Soviet general told me that the war is always the business of the young. "Old people do not go to war" he told me.

The Middle East is one of the youngest regions on the planet – around 40% of the region are people under the age of 25. They are living in the areas of acute land and water shortages as well as constant demographic growth and population density. Add to all that the factors mentioned above, and we end up with the recipe for an explosive cocktail.

Unfortunately, there are no clear-cut solutions to the problems of the region, and probably, it will continue living through dramatic and very painful turbulences until it reaches internal balance, and stability will start emerging from within. And this process will take many years.

This piece of writing will leave many with the sense of exaggerated pessimism. I sincerely hope I am very wrong and things will turn out differently for the region. But there is also an element, although "dark", but of optimism in the presented doom-and-gloom picture. As famous Spanish writer Cervantes once put it: "to be prepared is half the victory".