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International Actors' Role in the Syrian Crisis

Interview with Nourhan El Sheikh, Professor of International Relations,
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Abstract. Professor Nourhan El Sheikh is a Professor of International Relations, Faculty of Economics & Political Science, Cairo University, Member of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs.

She is the author of *Russian-American Relations from Cold War to Cold Peace* [El Sheikh 2018], *Soviet and Russian Attitudes toward Arab Unity from the Beginning of the 20th Century to the Present* [El Sheikh 2013], *Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle East in the 21st Century* [El Sheikh 2010], *Role of the ruling elite in the restructuring of foreign policy — A study of the Russian situation (1985—1996)* [El Sheikh 2000].

Prof. El Sheikh regularly gives lectures at Nasser Higher Military Academy (Egypt), the Institute of Arab Research and Studies (Arab League), and the Institute of Diplomatic Studies at the Egyptian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and other institutions and research centers.

In her interview, Prof. El Sheikh talks about influence of non-regional actors such as the United States and Russia in the Syrian crisis. Prof. El Sheikh expresses the constructive role of Russia in the resolution of this conflict and fighting international terrorist groups.

Key words: Syrian conflict, US strategy in the Middle East, Russia, international terrorism, Turkey, the Gulf states

— **Terrorism has become a threat to national, regional and global security. How to win the battle against it? What kind of strategy is needed?**

— Terrorism is absolutely a global challenge that goes beyond Nazism in its gravity and bloodiness. Terrorist attacks target crowds of innocent people. ISIS, for instance, despite its obvious retreatment in Syria, Iraq and Libya, is trying to prove that it is still standing by destabilizing these states, spreading terror and panic among the citizens, and turning them against their governments.

It is not difficult to crush terrorism but we strongly need to unit efforts against it. The world is badly in need to build a strong anti-terrorist alliance. The illusion that ISIS is a Sunni power combating the “Shiite terrorism” should stop, also the support from some countries in the region to ISIS under that illusion.

It is necessary to distinguish between those who really fight terrorism and others who just pretend fighting it. There is no longer any room for maneuvering. States should overcome their narrow interests to move forward in crashing terrorism.

On a country level, it is important to prevent terrorists' return of Syria from entering other countries. Some sources point out that the terrorists who attacked the Egyptian

churches had gone to Syria in 2013 and returned back to Egypt. The Russian approach in that context is the best. The terrorists must be closed out where they are.

Deterrent punishment is also needed. Terrorists feel safe from punishment. Moreover, every suspect should be treated as a potential terrorist until proving not guilty.

In parallel with that, it is urgent to take serious steps regarding the social and cultural incubator with making a special focus on education and media. We are witnessing the spread of extremist teachers instilling their aggressive values to young generation. It means that they are raising terrorists or potential terrorists. In Egypt two third of its population is young, it is really a disaster. Media plays also an important role not only in enlightenment but in disgracing those who support terrorism through spreading the related information and documents.

In sum, the world is at a crossroads now, and decisive steps should be taken on both international and national levels against terrorism and its sponsoring powers to win the battle.

— The Middle East is the richest energy region. Obviously, it attracts the non-regional actors' interests. How do you evaluate the role of energy factor in the Syrian conflict?

— The United States, a major oil and gas producer, is actively competing in the energy market. Washington is trying to re-draw a new world energy map in light of discovering huge reserves of shale oil and gas in the United States. The increased importance of the oil and gas pipelines, that turned from just a way for fuel transfer, to the arteries of life for many countries and a tool to increase its influence, explains the US policy toward several areas rich in energy sources.

Some explains the US policy on Syria and its role in the escalation of conflict with the attempt to extend lines of energy through the Syrian territory. According to the US geologist survey there are about 120 trillion cubic feet of gas recoverable in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, which includes the coast of Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Cyprus. In the case of American control on Syria, or even some parts of it, these fields and reserves would become under the American control, preventing Russians and Iranians to work and invest in, where Iran and Russia participated in projects to help Lebanon and Syria in the exploration and development of their fields. Syria also is a key to Asia through the line that runs from Iran through Turkmenistan to China and vice versa from the Caspian Sea region, the proposed line, which may extend from Iran through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the sea (New Silk Road).

— How would you characterize the US Middle East strategy at present stage? Has anything changed in the American foreign policy in the Middle East after the election of the new president?

— The American global strategy traditionally includes the political claim of spreading democracy, by force in Iraq, and across the color revolutions in Russia's neighborhood, and what it is called the "Arab Spring" in the Arab region. During that process the United States influenced the national sovereignty of many Arab countries (Libya, Syria, Yemen), which have finally lost their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Washington is trying to break up the big entities in the Arab world, according to religious, denominational and sectarian lines, and is fueling conflicts and civil wars, which threatens with large-scale regional wars.

Obviously, Trump's administration lost credibility. On March 31, 2017 the White House announced that the United States should accept the political reality and that the future of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should be determined by the Syrian people. A week later Washington bombed Syria and confirmed its inability to deal with al-Assad!

American strikes on Syria in 2017 and 2018 took place despite Washington's failure to prove the Syrian government's responsibility on using chemical weapons and without an objective international investigation of what had happened in Khan Sheikhoun and Douma. Damascus, under a Russian-American agreement after the Sarin gas incident in the Eastern Ghouta in 2013, joined the Chemical Weapons Convention and agreed to destroy its stockpiles under the auspices of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in January 2016.

There was probably a deal between D. Trump and Pentagon supported by other institutions to relieve pressure and charges against him for "his relationship with Moscow" in exchange for allowing the strikes. Trump wanted to create the image of the powerful leader of the Americans. The strikes also should have calmed the Arab Gulf countries worries and confirmed the US commitments toward them.

The United States is moving ahead toward dividing Syria, separating north and south of Syria through three forces affiliated to it. Both Syria's democratic forces and the Turkish one controlling the north, and the Jordanian-backed factions are trying to dominate the south. The strikes, as previous American strikes, weakened the Syrian army in the front of the terrorist groups that had been ravaging the Syrian state for years. We might conclude that Washington rather tends to maintain the terrorist groups in Syria and not to eliminate them completely.

— You have raised a very sensible issue — the United States and the activities of radical groups in the region.

— The United States along the past six decades has allied itself with radical Islamic groups. After D. Eisenhower received a delegation from Muslim Brotherhood in 1950s, Washington and a number of European capitals, especially London, opened their doors and embraced MB members fleeing from Egypt and other countries after committing terrorist attacks.

The alliance between Washington and extremist groups has strengthened due to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, where MB cooperated with US intelligence and pushed thousands of followers to fight the Soviets. Washington did not only ally itself with existing terrorist organizations but also created new ones. As Britain supported the rise of Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s to break up the unity of Egyptian society and to undermine the Egyptian liberation movement, the CIA through its operation, the "Cyclone", created al-Qaeda to challenge the Soviets. Washington and its ally Pakistan have also been behind the formation of Taliban to ensure pro-government authority in Kabul.

Despite the end of the Cold War and 9/11 attacks the American policies have continued toward Islamic movements. United States and European Union refused to consider Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Moreover, they allowed it to penetrate their societies and formed pressure groups on decision-makers in Washington and Brussels. Some MB followers have become influential advisers to President Obama and EU bodies. United States brought them to power in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Central Europe, then in Turkey, and supported their access to power in the Arab countries after 2011.

On the other hand, the West has exploited the instability that is sweeping the Arab countries, especially Syria, and tried to get rid of the European extremists, whose number has increased significantly in Europe and become a worrying phenomenon by encouraging them to “jihad” in Syria. “Free Europe Radio” along the European Union urged young people to “jihad” in Syria and the Middle East. It was a plan to clean up Europe from extremists and move them voluntarily to our region where they would settle forever. The West with the help of some regional partners paved the way to the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria”¹. Thousands of European extremists were poured into Syrian territory and joined ISIS under the pretext of ousting Bashar al-Assad.

— Being a key expert in the Middle East and representing at the same time the region, how would you assess the Russia’s role in the Syrian crisis and in the fight against terrorism? Your point of view is of a special interest to us.

— In contrast to the US role, Russia has followed very constructive policy. The military operation turned to be a very important pillar for the Russian policy in Syria. Russian air strikes against terrorists started in September 2015. In December 2017 Russia’s Defense Ministry declared Syria “100% free of Islamic State”. This is the harvest of huge Russian efforts over more than two years. Russia’s Aerospace Forces have carried out more than 92,000 air strikes. It managed to destroy around 100,000 terrorists’ command centers, training camps and other sites. As well as eliminate about 54,000 terrorists among them Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS founder, and a large number of ISIS senior leaders.

This would be complemented with the peace process. Initiating Astana track in January 2017 has been a vital step toward restoring peace and stability in Syria. For the first time, representatives of what so called “Syrian armed opposition” took part in the direct negotiations with the Syrian government. That was another great achievement. Over eleven rounds of difficult Astana negotiations Russia, in cooperation with other guarantors, Iran and Turkey, managed to move Syria from a state of war to stability through the areas of reducing escalation and the efforts of the National Reconciliation Center in Hmeymim.

For the first time, the Syrian opposition united in one delegation to Geneva. That was an inconceivable achievement in the light of the sharp contradictions among different opposition factions. It was the Russian initiative to gather the three opposition platforms,

¹ Prohibited in Russian Federation.

Moscow, Riyadh and Cairo, in one delegation as an important and necessary step to achieve the peaceful settlement in Syria.

The Congress of the peoples of Syria in Sochi along with Geneva would define the general features of the new Syrian Constitution and the democratic secular Syrian state, and the timetable for the parliamentary and presidential elections. In this context, federalism and the Lebanese model are both not acceptable in Syria as they would devote divisions and fuel sectarian conflicts. But it is still important to think about the Kurds within Syria. The Syrian opposition has an opportunity to change and should exploit this opportunity otherwise they will be bypassed and ignored, especially since they no longer have no power on the ground and Bashar al-Assad remains the legitimate authority.

During his meeting with President V. Putin, Bashar al-Assad expressed optimism concerning the Syrian future and his role in that future. He was deeply grateful for Russia for rescuing Syria from darkness. It seems that al-Assad will continue to be the main player in Syrian political scene, due to the change in the balance of power on the ground in the light of the successes achieved by the Syrian army with Russian support. Moreover, we shouldn't neglect the trend of the continued division and disagreement among Syrian opposition. As well as the inability of the opposition to nominate an alternative represents a real competitor for al-Assad, who still enjoys popularity among Syrians.

President Putin's personal enormous efforts to reach a consensus with other international and regional powers over the upcoming settlement in Syria is notably help to pave the way and overcome many stumbling blocks that hampered peace in Syria. Direct communication from Putin to Trump, King Salman bin Abdulaziz, Egyptian President Sisi, King Tamim and Israeli Prime Minister B. Netanyahu greatly contribute pushing forward a settlement with given agenda. It is logical that the new constitution will come first, followed by the presidential and parliamentary elections.

In light of Putin — Trump Declaration in Vietnam, and the SC Resolution 2254, there is a set of principles and determinants that will govern the political process in Syria. The most important is the secularity of the Syrian state and the integrity of its territory. The Syrian political opposition has a real opportunity to participate constructively in shaping the Syrian future.

Still, there is a need for Russian support to maintain the achievements. The war on terrorism is not yet over as ISIS has changed its tactics and turned to guerrilla warfare and spreading terrorist cells and "lone wolves" all over the world. Russia's role is a vital necessity for the its national security, Syria, and the whole world.

— Conflict resolution is a very difficult and challenging process. After the end of hostilities, the next post-conflict settlement starts. What is the role of the external forces, including Russia, in restoring and strengthening Syria?

— Obviously, Russia will stay the main ally for Syria. Its role will not end with peaceful settlement. It is important to empower the Syrian army and develop its defense capabilities to stand for terrorism. That will go along with a developmental role in reconstruction. Iran will also play an important role in this regard. Uncertainty and

doubt will probably continue to dominate the Turkish position. These suspicions are increasing in the case of the United States and the West. However, the spread of terrorism and its threat to the security of the West and Turkey might be a harsh lesson for both; hopefully they got it, prompting them not to repeat mistakes and not to play with fire of terror again.

Along five years, the Syrian capabilities have deteriorated and Syria seemed breathing last breath in September 2015. At that moment, Russian air strikes represented the “kiss of life” for Syria and the entire Middle East, which turned suddenly into a black-minded “Islamic Caliphate State”, ISIS, radiating violence, extremism and terrorism all over the earth. The Russian operation is successfully completed and fulfilled its main goals. That raises the question on what is beyond?

Syria is the greatest human tragedy since World War II. According to the UN reports, more than 260,000 people have been killed, more than half of the Syrian people has been displaced, infrastructure and entire areas have been destroyed. Civilians have been used by terrorists as human shields, and as hostages, when needed, to make deals on.

Russia devoted great efforts to humanitarian assistance. In December 2016, Russia initiated the establishment of four humanitarian corridors to the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo to allow aid to enter and evacuate hundreds of emergency medical cases. Moscow has shown effective cooperation with the United Nations to evacuate Syrian civilians from the eastern part of Aleppo controlled by the terrorists.

From February 2018 a humanitarian corridor has been opened in Eastern Gut to release the civilians. Simultaneously, head of the Russian Defense Ministry S. Shoigu proposed to open corridors from the Rukban refugee camp in Al Tanf, controlled by the United States. Ceasefire does not in any way include the strikes against terrorist groups such as ISIS, al-Nusra and all their collaborators.

Although Syrians in Al Tanf and the Rukban refugee camp are badly in need to the Russian initiative for humanitarian assistance, still there are many challenges for its implementation. Among most important is the American resistance and uncooperative policy. The US occupied area, stretches 55 kilometers around Al Tanf, which has become a safe zone for ISIS. The United States is impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid across that region. It has not allowed the humanitarian aid convoys to enter the area and has failed to ensure that United Nations representatives and international humanitarian organizations reach the Rukban refugee camp. There are more than 60,000 women and children from al-Raqqa and Deir al-Zour living in catastrophic circumstances in Rukban camp. Americans block humanitarian assistance to them from the Syrian government, Jordan or even international organizations.

— Conflict settlement in the Middle East is impossible without participation of the regional actors. How do you assess the role of Turkey and the Gulf countries in the process?

— Despite the great Syrian doubts in the Turkish policy and attitudes, Turkey will continue to be a major player in the Syrian scene through its influence on a number of political and armed groups and its occupation of part of the Syrian north, as well as its

presence in Idlib. Perhaps in the future and after a successful political process, tension will come back again to Syrian Turkish relation within the framework of Damascus' demand to withdraw Turkish troops from its territory, considering it as an illegal occupation.

This applies to all illegal foreign troops, including US ones. The confusion in US policy as a result of the tug-of-war between the White House and other institutions, and the escalation of internal contradictions among important segments of American society, will not form an influential American role in Syria.

It is also obvious that humanitarian corridors can only succeed if they are respected by armed groups. Eastern Ghouta is the last stronghold of the armed groups and al-Nusra near Damascus. They hit the humanitarian corridor with Mortar shells, preventing civilians from leaving and assistance from reaching them. This means that fighting may escalate as a result of violations by armed groups and their insistence on hiding themselves behind civilians.

Despite the nobility of the Russian initiative and its humanitarian targets, there are obstacles from other parties that do not care a lot about the Syrian people. The regional ones, Turkey and the Gulf states, should pressure their fellows within armed groups to respond positively to the Russian initiative. The United States must also prove its interest in human rights through real steps and help to open humanitarian corridors to Rukban camp. Both unfortunately seem to be far from reachable and Russia would continue fight alone to save Syrians.

Interviewed by E.M. Savicheva

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Роль международных акторов в сирийском кризисе

Интервью с Нурхан Эль-Шейх, профессором международных отношений Каирского университета, членом Египетского совета по иностранным делам

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В своем интервью профессор Эль-Шейх рассказывает о влиянии нерегиональных игроков, таких как США и Россия, на сирийский кризис. Профессор Эль-Шейх подчеркивает конструктивную роль России в разрешении этого конфликта и борьбе с международными террористическими группировками.

Ключевые слова: сирийский конфликт, стратегия США на Ближнем Востоке, Россия, международный терроризм, Турция, страны Персидского залива

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