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# **The Middle East: Impact of Afghanistan and Ukraine Crises on Key Regional Trends**

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The Taliban's (an organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation) rise to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the conflict in Ukraine have both had an impact on regional trends in the Middle East. This report sheds light on the transformation of new elements in Middle Eastern state relations and examines the changing role of key players in the region. It analyses the impact that the events in Afghanistan and Ukraine have had on the migration crisis in the Middle East, as well as on food security. The threats posed by radical Islamist movements are also examined.

The opinions set forth in the report reflect solely the personal opinions and research stances of the author and may be different from those of the Russian International Affairs Council Non-Commercial Partnership.

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# Introduction

The Taliban’s\* rise to power in August 2021 and the conflict in Ukraine have both had an impact on regional trends in the Middle East. That said, these phenomena are of an entirely different nature, and the aim here is not to compare them. There are also no grounds claiming that the events in Afghanistan and Ukraine have spurred new trends in the region. The argument of the following report is that both crises can be seen as powerful impulses with global implications that have become factors affecting the Middle East as well. New elements have emerged in the regional trends that already existed – elements that have been superimposed on top of these trends, even partly reinforcing them. In this paper, we consider five trends that have been influenced by the events in Afghanistan and Ukraine:\*

- U.S. optimization of its presence in the Middle East;
- the normalization of relations between key players in the region;
- the transformation of individual elements in regional relations;
- the aggravation of existing humanitarian crises in the region;
- the increased risk of radicalized Islamist movements and the growth of terrorism.

In this report, we attempt to analyse the impact of the events in Afghanistan and Ukraine on key regional trends in the Middle East. In the context of the ongoing conflict, it would appear that the conversation regarding this issue and what the global community can do to help the region needs some kick-starting.

The following report prepared by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) is based on interviews with numerous leading Russian experts, whose input allowed for an analysis of key trends in the Middle East using various points of view: from considering the regional politics of Iran and Turkey, to raising questions on terrorism and food security issues. Additionally, the report is based on information obtained during RIAC’s expert discussions, organized jointly with its partner organizations.

Each chapter deals with one of the trends listed above. This report is by no means comprehensive, and this is not its aim; it would be impossible within the framework of a single study to consider all of aspects tied to the Middle East in proper detail and from all required angles. The goal with this report is different; namely, it is to try to understand how the events in Afghanistan and Ukraine have impacted the Middle East, as well as to systemize our knowledge about the processes and phenomena that are currently taking place in the region.

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\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

# Optimization

Russian and foreign media outlets often claim that the United States is leaving the Middle East. One of the greatest arguments in favour of this claim is the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021. However, it would not be entirely accurate to use the word “withdrawal” to describe Washington’s policy in the Middle East. Contrary to popular belief, the main elements of Washington’s long-term policy in the Middle East remain. Importantly, the United States still has military bases in Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman (Table 1). While Washington has scaled down its military presence in the region, over 30,000 American troops remain stationed in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Washington maintains relations with Israel, Jordan, and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, as well as with the North African countries of Egypt and Morocco. It is also important that the United States continues to exert great political and economic pressure on Middle Eastern countries.

**Table 1. Numbers of U.S. Military Personnel Stationed at U.S. Bases in the Middle East**

Country	Number of U.S. Military Personnel
Kuwait	13,500
Qatar	8000–10,000
Bahrain	7000
United Arab Emirates	3500
Saudi Arabia	2700
Oman	A few hundred

Source: Compiled by the author based on data published by the Heritage Foundation.<sup>2</sup>

Participants of the July 2022 RIAC seminar “The U.S. Factor in the Middle East in the New Conditions” preferred to use the term “*optimization*” to “withdrawal” when defining Washington’s policy in the region: the United States now aims to optimize its resources in order to maintain operational capabilities and influence in the region.<sup>3</sup>

The process of optimization was launched long before the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. To illustrate, according to available data, the American

<sup>1</sup> O’Connor T., “Biden Seeks to End ‘Forever Wars,’ but Still Has Over 30,000 Troops in Middle East One Year On,” Newsweek Digital, January 20, 2022/  
URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/biden-seeks-end-forever-wars-still-has-over-30000-troops-middle-east-oneyear-1668815>

<sup>2</sup> Robinson N., “Middle East,” The Heritage Foundation, October 18, 2022/  
URL: <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-the-global-operating-environment/middle-east>

<sup>3</sup> RIAC seminar “The U.S. Factor in the Middle East in the New Conditions,” July 25, 2022.

contingent left northern Syria in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Another sign that the United States is pursuing optimization in the Middle East is the fact that shortly after Joe Biden took office as President of the United States, Washington withdrew its support for the Saudi offensive in Yemen.<sup>5</sup>

Also, there is the increasingly proactive nature of America's strategy in the region. Whenever an escalation in the Middle East arises, the United States sends additional forces to certain countries there. One example of this is the delivery of additional air defence systems to Saudi Arabia following the 2019 Houthi cruise missile attacks on Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq and Khurais oil fields.<sup>6</sup> Additionally in January 2022, the United States sent F-22 fighter jets and a guided missile destroyer to the United Arab Emirates following a Houthi missile strike on the country.<sup>7</sup>

The U.S. presence in the Middle East is not aimed solely at responding to threats targeting its allies in the region; it also needs to be able to conduct pinpoint operations if and when it is necessary. One such occasion arose in August 2022, when the CIA carried out a drone strike in Kabul that ended up taking out Al-Qaeda\* leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>8</sup>

Iran is likely a key reason why the United States continues to maintain a significant military presence in the Middle East. Iran's regional policy, in addition to its ongoing nuclear programme, remains as one of the main long-term threats to the interests of the United States and its allies in the region. According to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Washington will explore other options if negotiations to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) fail;<sup>9</sup> this statement in of itself can only be interpreted as a threat.

That said, it is uncertain whether or not the United States is even interested in restoring the JCPOA. Washington wants to make a deal on its own terms, which are not entirely acceptable for Tehran, given that Iran has taken great steps in both its nuclear and missile programmes in the years since the United States pulled out of the agreement. At the same time, the Iranians are starting to believe that the country can prosper even under heavy sanctions.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Barnes J., Schmitt E., "Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Northern Syria," The New York Times, October 13, 2019. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/mark-esper-syria-kurds-turkey.html>

<sup>5</sup> Landay J., Renshaw J., "Biden Ends U.S. Support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Says War 'Has to End,'" Reuters, February 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-biden-yemen-int-idUSKBN2A4268>

<sup>6</sup> DeYoung K., Ryan M., Sonne P., "U.S. to Send Additional Troops to Saudi Arabia after Attacks on Oil Facilities," The Washington Post, September 20, 2019. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-announces-new-sanctions-on-irans-central-bank/2019/09/20/23643aae-dbb9-11e9-a688-303693fb4b0b\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-announces-new-sanctions-on-irans-central-bank/2019/09/20/23643aae-dbb9-11e9-a688-303693fb4b0b_story.html)

<sup>7</sup> "U.S. F-22 Squadron Arrives to Help UAE Ward Off Houthi Attacks," Al-Monitor, February 14, 2022. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/02/us-f-22-squadron-arrives-help-uae-ward-houthi-attacks>

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>8</sup> Knickmeyer E., "Explainer: Who Was al-Zawahiri – and Why Did U.S. Kill Him?" The Associated Press, August 2, 2022. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-ayman-al-zawahiri-qaida-biden-united-states-171556fce4719d012726fb979a14cc81>

<sup>9</sup> Blinken A., "Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Mary Louise Kelley of NPR's All Things Considered," U.S. Department of State, January 13, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-mary-louise-kelley-of-nprs-all-things-considered/>

<sup>10</sup> Many of the experts who attended the RIAC seminar "The U.S. Factor in the Middle East in the New Conditions" on July 25, 2022 attested to this belief.

While the Middle East remains an area of focus for Washington, and while the United States maintains a presence in the region (partly to contain Iran), the region as a whole will cease to be a U.S. foreign policy priority.<sup>11</sup> Research professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, lead research fellow at the Center for International Security at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and RIAC member Dmitri Trenin noted in an interview with RIAC that the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan was another indication that Washington is now turning its back on dead-end foreign policy areas in order to focus on different vectors, most notably possible confrontation with China. According to Trenin, the United States is forced to divide its attention between China and rallying the support of its allies in Eastern Europe, thus diverting Washington's attention from the Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan turned out to be a PR disaster for Washington Middle Eastern countries. Ashraf Ghani's government collapsed almost instantly, as did the army, which the United States spent countless money on to bring it up to combat readiness. In an interview with RIAC, Head of the Center for the Middle East Studies at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and RIAC member Irina Zvyagelskaya pointed out that the way in which U.S. troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan left countries that rely on the United States for maintaining security with many questions.<sup>13</sup>

With the emergence of U.S. optimization in the region, Middle Eastern countries have started to show greater interest in cooperating with other actors, such as China and Russia. However, in terms of becoming a potential partner, a problem arises with Russia. With the onset of the conflict in Ukraine, Russia is no longer in the position it was in before the crisis, and China is generally trying to move away from military-political cooperation.

The damage that the Afghanistan withdrawal has done to the U.S. image in the Middle East also comes at a time when China has pursued economic expansion in the region, although in no way does this mean that it is ready to assume any military and political obligations. However, it is still an extremely important region for China's energy security. As of March 2022, China imports as much as 53.8 per cent of its oil from the Middle East, according to some estimates.<sup>14</sup>

Trade and transport corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative run through Middle Eastern countries. This means that the Middle East is more than simply a source of hydrocarbons for Beijing – it is also an important transit zone that is crucial to the creation of a single trade and economic space in Europe, Asia, and Africa by China. In an interview with RIAC, Deputy Director for Research and Head of the

<sup>11</sup> This argument was put forward by some of the experts who attended the RIAC seminar "The U.S. Factor in the Middle East in the New Conditions" on July 25, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Dmitri Trenin. March 14, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Irina Zvyagelskaya. January 26, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Zhou O., Mohanty S., "China Grows Reliance on Middle Eastern Crudes in Q1 as Russian Inflows Drop 11%" S&P Global, April 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/042022-china-grows-reliance-on-middle-eastern-crudes-in-q1-as-russian-inflows-drop-11>



Center for Asia Pacific Studies at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences Alexander Lomanov noted that the construction of cross-border infrastructure as part of the Belt and Road Initiative means that China has a vested interest in the stability of the Middle East. He points out that resolving conflicts will bring material benefits both to Middle Eastern countries and to Chinese investors. At the same time, according to Lomanov, China has no intention of replacing the United States as the region's "hegemon": Beijing has repeatedly stressed that the Middle East does not need "outside leadership."<sup>15</sup>

Some Arab countries, including Washington's traditional allies, would probably like to develop military-technical cooperation with China. Reports have surfaced, for example, on Saudi Arabia receiving assistance from China in developing its own ballistic missiles.<sup>16</sup> According to U.S. intelligence, China launched the construction of a military facility in a port near Abu Dhabi, but construction was halted when UAE authorities caved to U.S. pressure.<sup>17</sup> Then, in February 2022, the United Arab Emirates announced that it had purchased 12 Hongdu L-15 combat training aircraft and placed orders for another 36.<sup>18</sup> Notably, all this took place after negotiations between the United Arab Emirates and the United States on the purchase of 50 F-35 fighters (worth around \$23 billion) had stalled.<sup>19</sup>

Egypt is in the process of diversifying cooperation in the security sphere and has also expressed an interest in developing relations with Russia. However, sanctions against Russia place obstacles in the development of military-technical contacts with Moscow, as Middle Eastern countries risk falling under sanctions themselves. There has been no news on the supply of Russian Su-35 fighters to Egypt since the deal was announced in Russian and Egyptian media outlets back in 2019.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Russia continues to develop military-technical cooperation with Middle Eastern countries. In August 2021, a few days after the Taliban\* had captured Kabul, Russia and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement on military and military-technical cooperation.<sup>21</sup> In October 2022, reports surfaced in the media that Russia was planning on taking deliveries of Iranian drones and ballistic missiles.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Alexander Lomanov. January 19, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen Z., "U.S. Intel and Satellite Images Show Saudi Arabia is Now Building its Own Ballistic Missiles with Help of China," Cable News Network, December 23, 2021. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/23/politics/saudi-ballistic-missiles-china/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> Lubold G., Strobel W., "Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With U.A.E.," The Wall Street Journal, November 19, 2021. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>

<sup>18</sup> The Ministry of Defence intends to purchase 12 Chinese L-15 planes (in rab. L 15 شراء تنوي الدفاع 12 طراز من صينية طائرة), Emirates News Agency, February 23, 2022. URL: <https://wam.ae/ar/details/1395303023646>

<sup>19</sup> "UAE told the U.S. it Will Suspend Talks on F-35 jets – Emirati Official," Reuters, December 15, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/uae-threatens-pull-out-23-blm-f-35-drone-deal-with-us-wsj-2021-12-14/>

<sup>20</sup> "Source: Russia Launches Production of Su-35s for Egypt," TASS, May 16, 2020. URL: <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/8488699>

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>21</sup> "Russia and Saudi Arabia Sign Deal on Military Cooperation," Kommersant, August 23, 2021. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4956440>

<sup>22</sup> Mustafa S., "WP: Russia to Get New Ballistic Missiles and Drones from Iran," Gazeta.ru, October 16, 2022. URL: <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/2022/10/16/18808489.shtml>

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has put Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in a difficult position. On the one hand, they value their partnership with the United States. On the other hand, they would like to develop cooperation with Russia, primarily in the economic sphere. Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries value their economic partnership with Moscow, especially since their economic interests largely coincide (particularly in the energy sector). During his July 2022 visit to Saudi Arabia, U.S. President Joe Biden asked Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud to increase Saudi oil production (as this would reduce global oil prices). However, Riyadh refused, deciding instead to stick to the quotas and agreements reached within the framework of OPEC+.<sup>23</sup> This decision, however, had more to do with Riyadh's interest in maintaining high oil prices.

The Arabian monarchies are trying to distance themselves from the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The United Arab Emirates is even trying to step in as a mediator. In October 2022, President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Russia. During his meeting with Vladimir Putin, the Sheikh declared that his country was ready to mediate in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>24</sup>

The Middle East is also warming up to BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in which Russia and China play a leading role. This reflects their interest in looking for new international platforms to promote their individual agendas.

The SCO's Dialogue Partners include Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and the process of granting a Dialogue Partner status to Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates was launched following the SCO Summit in Samarkand on September 15–16, 2022.<sup>25</sup> President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has also declared the country's desire to join the SCO.<sup>26</sup> In September 2022, Iran signed a Memorandum of Commitment to the SCO, paving the way for full membership in the organization.<sup>27</sup>

In June 2022, Iran applied to join BRICS,<sup>28</sup> and in November, Algeria also announced its desire to join the association.<sup>29</sup> President of the BRICS International

<sup>23</sup> Faucon B., and Said S., "As Oil Nears \$100, Saudis Snub U.S., Stick to Russian Pact Amid Ukraine Crisis," Wall Street Journal, February 16, 2022.

URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-oil-nears-100-saudis-snub-u-s-stick-to-russian-pact-amid-ukraine-crisis-11645015415>

<sup>24</sup> Saleh A., Hussein H., "UAE, Russia Discuss Cooperation and Issues of Mutual Concern," Emirates News Agency, October 12, 2022. URL: <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303091119>

<sup>25</sup> Bobylev S., "SCI Countries Adopt Joint Communiqué," TASS, November 1, 2022.

URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16216165>

<sup>26</sup> Guldogan D., "World Leaders Hail Türkiye's Mediation Role in Russia–Ukraine War: Erdogan," Anadolu Agency, September 17, 2022.

URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/world-leaders-hail-turkiyes-mediation-role-in-russia-ukraine-war-erdogan/2687691>

<sup>27</sup> Belyaev M., Sapozhnikov A., "Iran Signs Memorandum on Joining SCO," Kommersant, September 15, 2022.

URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5560441>

<sup>28</sup> "Iran Applies for BRICS Membership," Tasnim News Agency, June 27, 2022.

URL: <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/06/27/2735202/iran-applies-for-brics-membership>

<sup>29</sup> "Algeria Files Application to Join BRICS (in Arab. بريكس منظمة إلى للانضمام رسمياً طلباً تقدم الجزائر)," Al-Shorouk, November 7, 2022.

URL: <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=07112022&id=02415b72-69be-4a26-879f-3399902d5bcc>

Forum Purnima Anand has revealed that Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey plan on joining BRICS too.<sup>30</sup>

China and Russia are likely to step up their role in the Middle East. At the same time, Washington's optimization policy in the region will probably be reflected in the positions of some EU countries. After the United States pulled its troops out of Afghanistan, a number of experts from the European Union started to question the effectiveness of direct military intervention in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> The lessons of Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya show that military interventions only lead to greater destabilization in the targeted country. It would be safe to assume that it would be more difficult these days for European politicians to convince their voters of the need for such actions.

Another possible consequence of Washington's policy of optimization in the Middle East is that some European countries (particularly France and the United Kingdom) could start to play a greater role in the region. France is an important player in the East Mediterranean Gas Forum and is also actively developing bilateral relations with Middle Eastern countries. It is also noteworthy that President of France Emmanuel Macron took part in the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in August 2021. More noteworthy is the fact that he was the only representative of a non-regional power in attendance. The Final Communiqué of the Conference stated that "the region faces common challenges that require the region's countries to deal with them on a basis of joint cooperation and mutual interests."<sup>32</sup> More so, France supplies weapons to Middle Eastern countries. One of the most notable deals in this area is the agreement signed between Paris and Cairo on the supply of 30 *Rafale* fighters to Egypt in May 2021.<sup>33</sup>

EU countries are interested in a stable Middle East. As far as they are concerned, the wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Afghanistan have instigated a migration crisis and paved the way for terrorist groups to expand their activities. Europe may thus take on greater responsibility for the stability of the Middle East region, which will come in the form of less direct military engagement and greater support for "friendly" governments, as well as the introduction of humanitarian programmes.

Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Washington's other Middle Eastern allies are trying to diversify their regional security partnerships, there is nothing so far that can match the level that the United States provides. The very presence of Iran also ensures that Washington's traditional allies in the Middle East will maintain a high level of interaction with the United States.

<sup>30</sup> Baynazarov E., Vasilyeva M., "The More the Merrier: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey Could Join BRICS," *Izvestiya*, July 14, 2022. URL: <https://iz.ru/1364353/maria-vasilyeva-elmar-bainazarov/popolnit-rady-egipet-saudovskaiaaraviiia-iturticia-mogut-vstupit-v-briks>

<sup>31</sup> Aydintaşbaş A., Barnes-Dacey J., Batmanghelidj E., et al., "The Fall of the Afghan Government and What it Means for Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, August 25, 2021. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-fall-of-the-afghan-government-and-what-it-means-for-europe/>

<sup>32</sup> Final Communiqué of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iraq, August 28, 2021. URL: <https://mofa.gov.iq/2021/08/?p=25539>

<sup>33</sup> "Egypt and France Sign Contract on Delivery of 30 Rafale Jets." Photo (in Arab. مصر وفرنسا توقعان عقد توريد 30 طائرة طراز رافال-صور), *Youm7*, May 3, 2021. URL: <https://www.youm7.com/story/2021/5/3/5306027/مصر-وفرنسا-توقعان-عقد-توريد-30-طائرة-طرز-رافال-صور>

At the same time, the United States is trying to build a policy in the region that is more pragmatic in nature. It is unlikely that Washington will become embroiled in military conflicts in the Middle East for some time, unless it exhausts all other avenues for resolving an issue completely. In the medium term, the United States' priority in the Middle East will be to take an expanded approach on forming a regional security system that includes Israel.<sup>34</sup> In the context of the ongoing confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the interests of Tel Aviv and Riyadh in containing the threat from Iran align. The United States will do everything in its power to support a rapprochement between the two countries. The most pressing issue right now concerns the creation of a regional air and missile defence system under the auspices of the United States and with the participation of Israel, and that is directed against Iran's missile potential. It is unlikely, however, that this plan will see the light of day any time soon.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> RIAC seminar "The U.S. Factor in the Middle East in the New Conditions," July 25, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

# Normalization

The following phenomena considered in this report only had an indirect impact on the partial normalization of relations between a number of countries in the Middle East. Given this, it would be more productive to discuss how Washington's policy of optimization in the Middle East was reflected in the willingness of some countries to maintain a dialogue with their rivals.

The normalization of relations between Middle Eastern countries began in 2020 with the U.S.-mediated signing of the Abraham Accords; this established diplomatic relations between Israel and the Arab countries of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Morocco was the next country in the region to normalize relations with Israel.<sup>36</sup> The signing of the Abraham Accords demonstrated the readiness of the Arabian monarchies and other Arab states to take an important step towards normalizing relations with Israel and strengthening their own security. It is worth noting here that, unlike other Arab states, Saudi Arabia cannot afford to openly normalize relations with Israel. Relations between Riyadh and Tel Aviv are likely to retain their confrontational rhetoric.

In January 2021, Qatar restored relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain.<sup>37</sup> These countries severed ties with Doha in 2017 due to the country's connections to the Muslim Brotherhood\*. At the 41<sup>st</sup> GCC Summit, where a "solidarity and stability" agreement on the reconciliation with Qatar was signed, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud called on the Arab monarchies to unite their efforts to confront the threats posed by Iran and its proxies.<sup>38</sup> In this context, attempts to launch talks between Tehran and the Arab capitals in the spring of 2021 are particularly noteworthy.<sup>39</sup>

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021 and the subsequent Taliban\* take over had a massive impact on how the United States is perceived in the region. In an interview with RIAC, Senior Researcher at the Center for the Middle East Studies at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences Nikolay Kozhanov pointed out that this event confirmed the fears of the Persian Gulf monarchies that the United States was losing interest in being enmeshed in Middle Eastern affairs. According to Kozhanov, these countries have started to realize that they need to revise their foreign policy relations now that the United States will be less involved in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf moving forward.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Joint Declaration. U.S. Department of State, December 22, 2020.  
URL: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Joint-Declaration-US-Morocco-Israel.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> "Saudi FM: Full Ties Restored between Qatar and Blockading Nations," Al Jazeera, January 5, 2021.  
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/5/saudi-says-full-ties-restored-between-qatar-and-embargo-nations>

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation

<sup>38</sup> Abueish T., "GCC Summit: Saudi Crown Prince Says Member States Must Unite against Iran's Threats," Al Arabiya Network, January 5, 2022.  
URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/01/05/Saudi-Arabia-s-Crown-Prince-heads-GCC-Summit-in-AIUla>

<sup>39</sup> "Iran Confirms Talks with Saudi Arabia to De-Escalate Regional Tensions," Middle East Eye, May 10, 2021.  
URL: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-saudi-arabia-talks-confirm-regional-tensions>

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Nikolay Kozhanov. January 12, 2022.

A certain trend towards the partial reorganization of regional alliances was observed even before the United States pulled its troops out of Afghanistan, and this only intensified after August 2021. In the medium term, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain is expected to step up military and technical cooperation. The desire to reduce tensions in the region and establish more pragmatic relations with rivals will likely prevail among Middle Eastern countries. In his conversation with RIAC, Nikolay Kozhanov stressed that GCC countries will opt for establishing relations within the region. Arab monarchies will form coalitions based on regional powers, for they are starting to realize that if a conflict were to break out, they will have no one to rely on but themselves.<sup>41</sup> According to Kozhanov, this applies to those countries which have been in direct confrontation in the past.<sup>42</sup>

In this connection, the results of the August 2021 Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership are important, as the event marked the beginning of a new stage in building a dialogue between states competing with each other, in particular between Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Qatar and Turkey.<sup>43</sup>

Negotiations between GCC countries and Iran intensified following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and Iran have held five rounds of talks since September 2021.<sup>44</sup> In December 2021, a high-ranking delegation from the United Arab Emirates visited Iran.<sup>45</sup> In August 2022, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates restored diplomatic relations with Iran, which had been severed in 2017.<sup>46</sup>

Middle East normalization eases contradictions not only in the relations between Arab countries and Iran, but also with Turkey. Nowhere have GCC countries warmed to Turkey more than the United Arab Emirates. In November 2021, after several years of tensions between the two countries, the *de facto* leader of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, paid an official visit to Turkey.<sup>47</sup> During the trip, the Emirates promised to invest \$10 billion in the Turkish economy.<sup>48</sup> The February 2022 visit of the President of Turkey to the United Arab Emirates was marked by the signing of 13 agreements on cooperation in the military, trade, tech, agriculture and other spheres.<sup>49</sup> These agreements are

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Nikolay Kozhanov. January 12, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Motamedi M., "Iran, Saudi Arabia Hold Fifth Round of Talks in Baghdad," Al Jazeera, April 23, 2022.

URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/23/iran-and-saudi-arabia-hold-stalled-5th-round-of-talks-in-baghdad>

<sup>45</sup> "UAE National Security Advisor to Visit Tehran," IRNA, December 5, 2021.

URL: <https://en.irna.ir/news/84565929/UAE-national-security-advisor-to-visit-Tehran>

<sup>46</sup> Kerr S., "UAE Ambassador Returns to Iran as Regional Tensions Ease with Islamic Republic," The Financial Times, August 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/236a5b61-1b61-403c-aa96-b439632f9dc8>

<sup>47</sup> Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan was officially elected President of the United Arab Emirates in May 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Kozok F., "UAE Sets Up \$10 Billion Fund to Support Turkey as Ties Warm," Bloomberg, November 24, 2021.

URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-24/uae-turkey-to-sign-financial-cooperation-deals-as-ties-mend>

<sup>49</sup> "UAE and Turkey Sign 13 Agreements During Erdoğan's Visit to Abu Dhabi,"

(in Arab. الإمارات وتركيا توقعان 13 اتفاقية خلال زيارة أردوغان لأبوظبي.) Sharq Al, February 14, 2022.

URL: <https://asharq.com/ar/4FpHgB9WYOWZHSAGw2lIf-الاتفاقيات-13-توقعان-تركيا-الإمارات>

expected to give an additional impetus to investment cooperation between the two countries.<sup>50</sup>

UAE investments into the Turkish economy could help Ankara solve some of its economic woes. The economic crisis is one of the key challenges of the Turkish government. In the run-up to the 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections, Erdoğan is attempting to show that he is ready and able to fix the country's economic problems, including by developing partnerships with other countries. He is also trying to promote a peaceful foreign policy agenda. To this end, he has restored relations with Israel,<sup>51</sup> vowed to improve relations with Egypt,<sup>52</sup> Saudi Arabia,<sup>53</sup> and Armenia,<sup>54</sup> and promised to develop a positive agenda with the EU countries.<sup>55</sup>

Turkey is working to improve its relations not only with those countries with which its interests in the region coincide, but also with states with which it has major ideological differences. For example, despite the fact that relations between Egypt and Turkey remain rather complicated, the two sides are prepared to work towards normalizing them. At the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah el-Sisi shook hands for the first time before holding talks that lasted an hour and a half. The Egyptian President's press secretary said that the handshake would mark the beginning of bilateral relations between Cairo and Ankara, while Erdoğan noted that it was the first step towards the further normalization of relations between the two countries.<sup>56</sup>

The normalization of relations between Middle Eastern countries has also affected Syria. In November 2021, a high-level delegation from the United Arab Emirates visited Syria, during which the two countries signed an agreement on the construction of a solar power plant in Syria.<sup>57</sup> A number of Arab countries (Algeria,<sup>58</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Onçun T., "UAE Seeks to Enhance Political, Economic Ties with Türkiye," Anadolu Agency February 14, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/uae-seeks-to-enhance-political-economic-ties-with-turkiye/2502332>

<sup>51</sup> Kershner I., "Israel and Turkey to Restore Full Diplomatic Ties," The New York Times, August 17, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/world/middleeast/israel-turkey-relations-ambassadors.html>

<sup>52</sup> Hegazi S., "Erdoğan Calls for Stronger Relations between Turkey and Egypt," Daily News Egypt, August 20, 2022.  
URL: <https://dailynewsegypt.com/2022/08/20/erdogan-calls-for-stronger-relations-between-turkey-and-egypt/>

<sup>53</sup> Gumrukcu T., "Erdoğan Says Turkey Continuing 'Positive Dialogue' with Saudi Arabia – Media," Reuters, February 16, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-turkey-continuing-positive-dialogue-with-saudi-arabia-media-2022-02-16/>

<sup>54</sup> Şebnem Oruç M., "Turkey to Take Further Steps for Improved Ties with Armenia: Erdoğan," Daily Sabah, February 23, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-to-take-further-steps-for-improved-ties-with-armenia-erdogan>

<sup>55</sup> "Erdoğan: Turkey Ready to Set 'Positive Agenda' with EU," Daily Sabah, January 12, 2021.  
URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/eu-affairs/erdogan-turkey-ready-to-set-positive-agenda-with-eu>

<sup>56</sup> "El-Sisi and Erdoğan's Handshake Marks Beginning of Bilateral Relations between the Two Countries," (in Arab: «الرئاسة»: مصافحة «السيسي» و«أردوغان» بداية لتطوير «العلاقات الثنائية» بين البلدين), Al Masry-Al Youm, November 22, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.almazryalyoum.com/news/details/2748349>

<sup>57</sup> "Syria Signs Agreement with UAE Firms to Build 300 Megawatt Power Station," Al Arabiya Network, November 11, 2021.  
URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/11/11/Syria-signs-agreement-with-UAE-firms-to-build-300-megawatt-power-station>

<sup>58</sup> "Algeria Supports Syria's Return to Arab League," The National, June 26, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2022/07/26/algeria-supports-syrias-return-to-arab-league/>

Egypt,<sup>59</sup> Oman,<sup>60</sup> and Iraq<sup>61</sup>) have called for reinstating Syria's membership in the Arab League, which would also create a favourable atmosphere for the further normalization of relations between Syria and Middle Eastern countries.

In March 2022, President of Syria Bashar al-Assad paid his first official visit to the United Arab Emirates since the start of the civil war in his country.<sup>62</sup> According to media reports, the heads of Turkish and Syrian intelligence agencies met on numerous occasions in August and September 2022. In November, President Erdoğan said that he did not rule out improving relations between Ankara and Damascus.<sup>63</sup> The following month, talks were held in Moscow between the Russian, Turkish and Syrian Ministers of Defence.<sup>64</sup> The meeting marked the first time in 11 years that the heads of the Syrian and Turkish Ministries of Defence had held negotiations of any form. At the same time, Turkey continues to be concerned about the problems surrounding Syrian Kurdistan, which will remain an obstacle to normalizing relations between Syria and Turkey. Thus, after years of confrontation between Saudi Arabia and its allies on the one hand, and Iran and Turkey on the other, tensions in the region continue to ease. It is worth noting, that the conflict in Ukraine has not affected this trend in any significant way.

While across-the-board normalization of relations are yet to be seen, some Middle Eastern countries have started to adjust their resource-draining approaches to solving regional problems. Despite all this, there is still no sufficient evidence to claim that all countries are revising their approaches to settling regional conflicts.

<sup>59</sup> Mikhail G., "Egypt, Oman Confer on Possible Syrian Return to Arab Fold," Al-Monitor, January 30, 2022.

URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/egypt-oman-confer-possible-syrian-return-arab-fold>

<sup>60</sup> "Badr Albusaidi: We Are Negotiating with Riyadh on Regional Issues and We Will not be the Third Gulf State to Normalize Relations with Israel"

(in Arab. (بدر البوسعيدي: ننتسق مع الرياض في قضايا المنطقة ولن نكون ثالث دولة خليجية تطبع مع إسرائيل

URL: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/3071751/بدر-البوسعيدي-ننتسق-مع-الرياض-في-قضايا-المنطقة-ولن-نكون-ثالث-دولة-خليجية-تطبع-مع>

<sup>61</sup> Aldroubi M., "Iraq Backs Syria Returning to Arab League," The National, April 11, 2021.

URL: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/iraq-backs-syria-returning-to-arab-league-1.1201199>

<sup>62</sup> "President al-Assad Visits UAE, meets Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum," Syrian Arab News Agency, March 18, 2022. URL: <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=266765>.

<sup>63</sup> "Turkey's Relations with Syria May Improve Like its Dialogue with Egypt: Erdogan," Shafaq News, November 27, 2022. URL: <https://shafaq.com/en/World/Turkey-s-relations-with-Syria-may-improve-like-its-dialogue-with-Egypt-Erdogan>

<sup>64</sup> "Syrian Ministry of Defense Calls Meeting of Heads of Syrian and Turkish Military Departments Positive," TASS, December 28, 2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/16710181>



# Transformation

The events in Afghanistan and Ukraine have not single-handedly had a game-changing impact on the changes taking place in the Middle East. Rather, they have accentuated existing trends, and this has been reflected, among other places, in the security system. There is a visible partial reconfiguration of relations in the region and of the positions and roles of individual states.

## Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

Saudi Arabia positions itself as a key military, political and economic centre in the Middle East. Riyadh is using the GCC to try and consolidate the efforts of the Arab monarchies to solve the region's economic and political problems. Since 2013, Saudi Arabia has led to an Arab coalition in the fight against the Houthis in Yemen. Riyadh is also a major player in the global energy market.

In terms of Afghanistan, it is worth noting that Saudi Arabia played a major role in the country between 1996 and 2001 and had close ties to the Taliban\*. However, Riyadh is no longer interested in interacting with radical Islamist groups, including the Taliban\*, nor is its ally, Abu Dhabi. Evidently, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are trying to position themselves as moderate Islamic countries. According to Irina Zvyagelskaya, the fact that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are in no hurry to recognize the Taliban\* government in Afghanistan is because of their reformist activities, which has led to the two Gulf monarchies becoming more open. More so, the spiritual leader of the Taliban\*, Hibatullah Akhundzada, calls himself the "Commander of the Faithful" and the actual head of the Muslim ummah. Such lofty ambitions are bound to cause resentment in the Arab monarchies.<sup>65</sup>

Zvyagelskaya further noted in her interview with RIAC that the United Arab Emirates is interested in having a presence in Afghanistan only if it is able to participate in economic recovery projects. On top of economic considerations, the United Arab Emirates wants to strengthen its international positions.<sup>66</sup> In the context of the rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Doha, it is important to point out that the United Arab Emirates managed to get the Taliban\* to sign an agreement that would allow companies from the United Arab Emirates to control the airspace over several airports in Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup>

According to Nikolay Kozhanov, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi initially took their cue from the United States by working exclusively with the central authorities. This, however, only weakened the positions of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Irina Zvyagelskaya. January 26, 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Yawar M., "Taliban to Sign Contract with UAE's GAAC Holding Over Airspace Control at Afghan Airports," Reuters, September 8, 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-sign-contract-with-uaes-gaac-holding-over-airspace-control-afghan-2022-09-08/>

Afghanistan. As Kozhanov points out, all this is added to Saudi Arabia's concerns over radical ideas being exported from Afghanistan to the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>68</sup>

## Qatar

The Taliban\* take over in Afghanistan helped strengthen Qatar's position in the region. Even before the events of August 2021, Qatar was trying to position itself as a key player in the resolution of the Afghan problem. More than 57,000 of the 124,000 people who fled the country after the Taliban\* took control were evacuated to Qatar.<sup>69</sup> Qatar also helped the United Nations deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.<sup>70</sup>

The Taliban\* opened an office in Doha in 2013,<sup>71</sup> and Qatar's role as an intermediary in the dialogue between the United States and the Taliban\* has been growing ever since. In an interview with RIAC, Nikolay Kozhanov noted that Qatar has always been ready to cooperate with any and all political forces on the Afghan issue and play the role of mediator. This has allowed Qatar to flex its muscles as a platform provider for resolving any issues that may arise. Kozhanov further claims that the negotiation process allowed Qatar to position itself as a channel through which relations with the Taliban\* can be established.<sup>72</sup> Doha served as an important platform for negotiations between the Taliban\* and external forces (primarily Washington) even before 2021, and has remained so ever since.<sup>73,74,75</sup>

## Iran

Iran was partially prepared for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Tehran established contacts not only with Afghanistan, but also with representatives of the Taliban\* movement.<sup>76</sup> Irina Zvyagelskaya pointed out that, in January 2022, the Taliban\* sent a delegation to Iran, where it met with the leader of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, Ahmad Massoud.<sup>77</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Nikolay Kozhanov. January 12, 2022.

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>69</sup> Cornwell A., "U.S. General Says Most of Those Evacuated from Afghanistan to Qatar are Now in Europe, U.S.," Reuters. September 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/fewer-than-1400-evacuees-afghanistan-still-qatar-base-us-general-says-2021-09-04/>

<sup>70</sup> "UNHCR and Qatar Deliver Humanitarian Aid by Air to Kabul During Winter," (مفوضية اللاجئين ودولة قطر تسيّر ران شحن جوية محملة بالمساعدات الإغاثية الشتوية إلى كابول), UNHCR, December 15, 2021. URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/qa/18169-مفوضية-لاجئين-قطر-ودولة-اللاجئين-مفوضية.html>

<sup>71</sup> "Taliban 'Set to Open Office in Qatar.'" Al Jazeera, January 18, 2013. URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/6/18/taliban-set-to-open-office-in-qatar>

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Nikolay Kozhanov. January 12, 2022.

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Delegation Meeting with Taliban Representatives. U.S. Department of State, July 1, 2022. URL: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-delegation-meeting-with-taliban-representatives-2/>

<sup>74</sup> Wintour P., "Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan Will Reshape Middle East, Official Warns," The Guardian, September 13, 2021. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/13/taliban-takeover-of-afghanistan-is-an-earthquake-for-middle-east>

<sup>75</sup> Marquardt A., "First on CNN: Top US Officials Hold First In-Person Meeting with the Taliban Since the US Killed al Qaeda's Leader in July, CNN, October 8, 2022. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/10/08/politics/us-taliban-talks-wasiq-qatar/index.html>

<sup>76</sup> Zafar Mehdi S., "Taliban Delegation Visits Iran for Afghan Peace Talks," Anadolu Agency, January 26, 2021. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/taliban-delegation-visits-iran-for-afghan-peace-talks/2122922>

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Irina Zvyagelskaya. January 26, 2022.

sees this as a serious bid on Iran's part to play an important role in Afghanistan's future.<sup>78</sup>

The Taliban's\* rise to power in Afghanistan opened up new economic opportunities for Iran. Afghanistan may prove useful for Iran in terms of circumventing sanctions. Even when U.S. forces were in Afghanistan, Iran actively exported goods to its neighbour. It is vital for Tehran to maintain and even increase exports to Afghanistan.<sup>79</sup>

Another "headache" for Iran, according to Kozhanov, is the growing strength of the Taliban\*; this has raised many questions in Iran, as well as in all the countries that are in one way or another connected with the region.<sup>80</sup> Iran has been attacked by the Taliban\* before, and the country's security forces will have to be increasingly vigilant when it comes to threats from Afghanistan. Border security will need to be ensured, not only in terms of conflicts in border regions, but also in terms of illegal migration and the illicit movement of drugs and weapons.

An additional challenge for Iran is the possible escalation of the inter-confessional conflict, the flames of which the most radical elements of the Taliban\* could stoke. There have already been reports of violence against Hazaras from Afghanistan.<sup>81</sup> Nikolay Kozhanov notes that Tehran was initially cautious of the Taliban\* government, which can be explained by its support for the Dari-speaking population of Afghanistan, as well as for the Shiite Hazaras.<sup>82</sup> If inter-confessional conflict escalates, Iran, which considers itself the protector of all Shiite people, will be forced to respond.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan proved that a small radical group could defeat even the largest army in the world. This fact may serve as an additional argument for Iran to increase investments into forces operating in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen that are loyal to Tehran. This could be achieved in Syria through Iran's activities to restore Syrian armed forces. As Vladimir Sazhin pointed out during the RIAC round table "Future of the Settlement of the Situation in Syria in the Context of the Ukrainian Conflict," Tehran relies on the creation and development of parallel non-state military structures that are subordinate not to the Syrian government, but to pro-Iranian Syrians and officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.<sup>83</sup>

The confrontation between Iran and Israel remains as one of the greatest threats to regional security in the Middle East. Tehran and Tel Aviv see each other as an

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Nikolay Kozhanov. January 12, 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Irina Zvyagelskaya. January 26, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Nikolay Kozhanov. January 12, 2022.

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>81</sup> "Afghanistan: Taliban Torture and Execute Hazaras in Targeted Attack – New Investigation," Amnesty International, September 15, 2022. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/afghanistan-taliban-torture-and-execute-hazarasintargeted-attack-new-investigation/>

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Nikolay Kozhanov. January 12, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> RIAC round table "Future of the Settlement of the Situation in Syria in the Context of the Ukrainian Conflict," July 28, 2022. URL: <https://youtu.be/H-t5aUQKwic>

existential threat. As for the other countries in the region, they are less concerned about Iran developing nuclear weapons than they are about its regional policy, which poses a far greater threat to them and is unlikely to change any time soon.<sup>84</sup>

At the same time, Israel, one of Iran's key rivals in the region, fears losing its nuclear monopoly in the region more than it does the prospect of Tehran using one of the nuclear weapons it may or may not have created. In addition, there is a danger that other regional players may be inspired by Iran to develop their own nuclear weapons. This is why Israel will do everything in its power to prevent Iran from doing so.

## Turkey

According to Amur Gadzhiev, a research fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a certain transformation can be observed in Turkey's strategy in the Middle East, which has also affected its policy towards Afghanistan. This has involved Ankara actively using the Sunni Islam factor in the Afghanistan track of its foreign policy.<sup>85</sup> According to the Head of the Europe–Middle East Center of the Institute of Europe of the Russian Academy of Sciences Alexandr Shumilin, the Taliban's\* power grab in Afghanistan increased Turkey's clout in the country and opened up a range of possibilities for it there.<sup>86</sup>

Gadzhiev further points to the fact that the events in Afghanistan pushed Turkey to step up its interaction with Qatar, as well as intensify its military and political cooperation with Pakistan. The most glaring example of the latter was the holding of joint military exercises by Turkey and Pakistan.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, as Gadzhiev notes, Turkey's focus on the Sunni Islam factor in its Afghan policy cannot but irritate India and Shiite Iran.<sup>88</sup>

Turkey's role in the Middle East has been altered to a far greater extent by the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Turkey has adopted a moderately balanced position on the situation. On the one hand, it has continued to develop military and technical cooperation with Ukraine, primarily in the form of supplying weapons to the country.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, Turkey has refused to join the West-led sanctions against Russia. As Amur Gadzhiev noted in his interview with RIAC, Turkey's role as an intermediary has increased in connection with the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>90</sup> Turkey acted as mediator in the March 2022 Russia–Ukraine negotiations. On March 10, 2022, the Turkish city of Antalya hosted talks between Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov and his Ukrainian

<sup>84</sup> RIAC Workshop "The U.S. Factor in the Middle East in the New Circumstances." July 25, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with Amur Gadzhiev. December 3, 2022.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Alexandr Shumilin. January 31, 2022.

<sup>87</sup> "Turkey, Azerbaijan, Pakistan Start Joint Military Exercises," *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 13, 2021.  
URL: <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-azerbaijan-pakistan-start-joint-military-exercises-167822>

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Amur Gadzhiev. December 3, 2022.

<sup>89</sup> Khalid T., "Turkey Grows Cautious over Selling Weapons to Ukraine: Report," *Al Arabiya*, June 21, 2022.  
URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2022/06/21/Turkey-grows-cautious-over-selling-weapons-to-Ukraine-Report>

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Amur Gadzhiev. December 3, 2022.

counterpart Dmytro Kuleba.<sup>91</sup> Then, on March 29, delegations from Russia and Ukraine met in Istanbul.<sup>92</sup>

In July 2022, Russia and Turkey signed an agreement on the export of grain from Ukraine, which came to be known as the “grain deal.”<sup>93</sup> Russia has called for Ukrainian grain to be exported to the poorest countries.<sup>94</sup> During a RIAC interview, Amur Gadzhiev drew attention to the fact that Turkey’s participation in the implementation of the “grain deal” has completely changed how the recipient countries perceive Ankara’s role on the international stage. What is more, as Gadzhiev notes, Turkey has also proved itself to be a reliable transit hub, successfully responding to the need to reroute transport that runs through Ukraine or Poland and goes from Europe to Russia. Turkey has also managed to increase its political clout in the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>95</sup>

It was against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis that Turkey announced its decision to launch a military operation of its own in Syria.<sup>96</sup> According to President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the operation is likely to involve ground troops in addition to air strikes.<sup>97</sup> Gadzhiev maintains that Ankara should not count on a quick and easy victory, as the United States provides the Syrian Democratic Forces<sup>98</sup> with material and diplomatic support.<sup>99</sup> It is worth noting that Turkey has not launched a full-scale military campaign as of yet. It has only carried out airstrikes on Kurdish positions as part of Operation Claw-Sword following the Istanbul terrorist attack in November 2022.<sup>100</sup>

Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev has stated publicly that Turkey’s operation in the country will only lead to a new wave of violence.<sup>101</sup> Director of the Fourth European Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Yury Pilipson also noted that Turkey’s operation in Syria could lead to the situation escalating.<sup>102</sup> This

<sup>91</sup> Atasunstev A., “Russia and Ukraine Hold Talks in Turkey,” RBC, March 10, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/10/03/2022/6229cb059a7947544503e664>

<sup>92</sup> Karpukhin S., “Ukraine’s Proposals and Russia’s Steps. Results of the Negotiations in Istanbul,” TASS, March 29, 2022.  
URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/14217669>

<sup>93</sup> Gromova V., “Russia and Turkey Sign Agreement on Grain Exports from Ukraine,” RBC, July 22, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/22/07/2022/62daaf739a79477b099ef773>

<sup>94</sup> “Putin: Only 5% of Ukrainian Grain Goes to the Poorest Countries,” Vedomosti, September 30, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2022/09/30/943322-tolko-5-ukrainskogo-zerna-ushlo>

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Amur Gadzhiev. December 3, 2022.

<sup>96</sup> Hayatsever H., Butler D., “Erdogan Says Turkey to Attack Kurdish Militants with Tanks, Soldiers,” Reuters, November 23, 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-urges-de-escalation-syria-after-series-retaliatory-strikes-2022-11-22/>

<sup>97</sup> Guldogan D., “Operation in Northern Iraq, Syria Not Limited to Air Campaign: Turkish President,” Anadolu Agency, November 21, 2022.  
URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/operation-in-northern-iraq-syria-not-limited-to-air-campaign-turkishpresident/2744078>

<sup>98</sup> The Syrian Democratic Forces is an alliance of Kurd, Arab and Assyrian militias in Syria.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with Amur Gadzhiev. December 3, 2022.

<sup>100</sup> “Air Operation Claw-Sword: Turkish Jets Hit Terror Targets in Northern Areas of Iraq, Syria,” Anadolu Agency, November 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/info/infographic/30865>.

<sup>101</sup> Zeynalova R., Malkina E., “Lavrentiev: Turkey’s Operation in Syria is Fraught with New Terrorist Threats,” TASS, November 28, 2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/interviews/16444167>

<sup>102</sup> “Russia Believes Turkey’s Planned Ground Operation in Syria is Premature – Foreign Ministry,” TASS, December 17, 2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/16619901>.

is likely due to the fact that increased hostilities in Syria could bolster the Islamic State (IS)\* and other radical groups that would try to take advantage of the situation. If Turkey does go ahead with its military operation, the current humanitarian crisis in Syria can be expected to worsen, which will exacerbate the nodal humanitarian crisis in the Middle East.

# Aggregation of Humanitarian Crises

The Taliban's\* take over in Afghanistan and the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine have contributed to a declining humanitarian situation in the Middle East. This became evident when the humanitarian crisis in the region's conflict zones intensified and new threats to food security sprung up. Thus, these two crises may have aggregated existing humanitarian crises in the medium term.

The United Nations Development Programme report "Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2021–2022" warns that Afghanistan may face a humanitarian crisis the likes of which have never been seen before. The document stresses that limiting external assistance for regular people can have dire consequences that could lead to approximately 23 million Afghan people requiring food assistance.<sup>103</sup>

The Taliban's\* rise to power in turn provoked a regional migration crisis. The deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country could bring about another wave of the crisis. Most Afghans who left their country after the Taliban\* came to power – between 500,000 and 1.5 million refugees – ended up in Iran.<sup>104</sup> Approximately 3.5 million Afghans and 20,000 Syrians currently live in Iran.<sup>105,106</sup> The refugee situation remains difficult in a number of other countries too. Lebanon, for example, hosts some 1.5 million refugees from Syria and another 8000 from Iraq.<sup>107</sup> Around 761,000 refugees are currently living in Jordan, including 674,000 from Syria, 66,000 from Iraq and 12,000 from Yemen.<sup>108</sup>

Turkey hosts more refugees than any other country in the region with more than 4 million people.<sup>109</sup> Refugees have negatively impacted the Turkish economy, a fact that the opposition often uses to criticize current Turkish authorities. Some 3.7 million Syrians, 153,000 Iraqis, and 140,000 Afghans are currently living in Turkey alone.<sup>110,111</sup> In addition, approximately 145,000 Ukrainians fled to Turkey in order to escape the military conflict in their country.<sup>112,113</sup>

\* An organization whose activities are prohibited on the territory of the Russian Federation.

<sup>103</sup> "Afghanistan: Socio-Economic Outlook 2021–2022," UNDP (2022).  
URL: <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-05/UNDP-AFG-Afghanistan-Socio-Economic-Outlook-2021-2022%20%281%29.pdf>

<sup>104</sup> "Afghanistan Situation Response in Iran," UNHCR, August 31, 2022.  
URL: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/95892>

<sup>105</sup> "Iran: Factsheet – August–October 2022," UNHCR, August–October 2022.  
URL: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/97077>

<sup>106</sup> The statistics include refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented people

<sup>107</sup> "Lebanon," UNHCR, September 2022. URL: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/3301>

<sup>108</sup> "Jordan," UNHCR, February 2022. URL: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1964>

<sup>109</sup> "Türkiye," UNHCR, September 2022.  
URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/11/Turkiye-factsheet-September-2022.pdf>

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> The statistics include refugees and asylum seekers.

<sup>112</sup> "Türkiye," UNHCR, September 2022.  
URL: <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/11/Turkiye-factsheet-September-2022.pdf>

<sup>113</sup> The statistics include refugees and asylum seekers.

The conflict in Ukraine has led to a major migration crisis, with over 7.6 million people being forced to flee to Europe.<sup>114</sup> Additionally, many who need assistance remain in Ukraine. Fixing the humanitarian situation in Ukraine may entail a partial redirection of aid intended for Palestinians, Syrians, Yemenis and residents of other Middle Eastern countries. In this sense, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine will exacerbate humanitarian issues in Middle Eastern conflict zones, as well as in the region's states that currently host a large number of refugees (Turkey, Iran and Lebanon).

The Middle East is currently facing numerous humanitarian crises. To ensure that the humanitarian situation in the region does spiral downward, international organizations need to increase their assistance to countries affected by humanitarian crises, as well as to refugees in the Middle East, immensely. Unfortunately, there simply is not enough money for this to happen.

The current humanitarian crises in the region are among the most serious in the world. For example, according to the United Nations, a difficult situation is unfolding in Yemen, where approximately 17.4 million people are experiencing food shortages.<sup>115</sup> However, it is the humanitarian crisis in Syria that affects the region the most. Looking at these statistics, it is clear that Syrians constitute as most of the refugees in Middle Eastern countries.

According to the United Nations, a total of 15.3 million Syrians will require humanitarian assistance in 2023.<sup>116</sup> Almost 90 per cent of the Syrian population lives below the poverty line.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, according to 2021 UN data, humanitarian assistance only reaches 6.8 million people per month, which is clearly not enough to solve existing humanitarian problems.<sup>118</sup> The UN World Programme has stated that the conflict in Ukraine has exacerbated the food crisis in Syria.<sup>119</sup> On top of this, electricity and fuel prices in Syria are skyrocketing.

Following talks in Tehran in July 2022, the Presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran issued a joint statement calling on the international community and humanitarian organizations to increase assistance to all Syrians.<sup>120</sup> Yet, there is never enough available aid. For example, in 2021, only 46 per cent of the amount needed was

<sup>114</sup> "Despite huge Solidarity with Ukraine's Refugees, Cities in Eastern Europe and Beyond Cannot Shoulder Burden Alone, Warn UN Talks," United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, October 7, 2022.

URL: <https://unece.org/covid-19/press/despite-huge-solidarity-ukraines-refugees-cities-eastern-europe-and-beyond-cannot>

<sup>115</sup> "In Photos: 17 Million on the Brink of Starvation in Yemen," United Nations Sustainable Development Group, March 16, 2022. URL: <https://unsdg.un.org/ru/latest/stories/photos-17-million-brink-starvation-yemen>

<sup>116</sup> "Syria: Needs Rise Amid Deepening Humanitarian and Economic Crisis," United Nations, December 21, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/12/1131912>

<sup>117</sup> "Brussels Conference: 11 Years of Conflict Set Syria Back 25 Years," United Nations, May 10, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/05/1423562>

<sup>118</sup> "2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic (February 2022)," OCHA, February 22, 2022. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2022-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-february-2022>

<sup>119</sup> "EU Holds Donors' Conference to Raise Money for Syria," United Nations, May 9, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/05/1423482>

<sup>120</sup> "Putin Pledges Support for Sending Humanitarian Aid to Syria Via Official Authorities," Izvestiya, July 19, 2022. URL: <https://iz.ru/1367310/2022-07-19/putin-podderzhal-obespechenie-gumpomoshchi-sirii-cherez-oficialnye-vlasti>



allocated for humanitarian needs.<sup>121</sup> UN experts calculated in May 2022 that at least \$10.5 billion needs to be directed to Syria as aid.<sup>122</sup>

Back in July 2014, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution to open four border checkpoints on the borders with Jordan, Iraq and Turkey to deliver humanitarian supplies to areas of Syria not controlled by the government. Only two checkpoints remained as of 2020, and this number soon fizzled to one.<sup>123</sup> Moscow has called for phasing out cross-border assistance to Syria. According to the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, humanitarian aid should be delivered through official channels, that is, via the government in Damascus.<sup>124</sup>

That said, while cross-border assistance is far from perfect, it nevertheless remains an important component of the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis, as it allows for aid to be delivered to areas that are not controlled by government forces. Secretary-General of the United Nations António Guterres has stated that the delivery of humanitarian aid to Syria through cross-border mechanisms is one of the most closely monitored humanitarian operations in the world.<sup>125</sup> In 2021, some 800 trucks containing food, medicine and vaccines delivered aid through the cross-border corridor.<sup>126</sup> That makes 50,000 trucks since 2014.<sup>127</sup>

Director of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and RIAC member Vasily Kuznetsov notes that overcoming the humanitarian crisis in Syria will be easier if the number of countries of the Persian Gulf are involved in solving Syria's humanitarian problems. Particularly, the United Arab Emirates may be interested in this endeavour. Kuznetsov also stressed that external players from other Asian countries, including India, could play a role in solving Syria's humanitarian problems. India may feel compelled to get involved due to its rivalry with China.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to providing humanitarian assistance to the Syrians, it is important to promote projects for the early reconstruction of the country. That said, very little is being done in this area. The top priority right now is to create the necessary con-

<sup>121</sup> "2022 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic (February 2022)," OCHA, February 22, 2022.  
URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2022-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-february-2022>

<sup>122</sup> "Brussels Conference: 11 Years of Conflict Set Syria Back 25 Years," United Nations, May 10, 2022.  
URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/05/1423562>

<sup>123</sup> "UN Security Council Extends Authorization for Cross-Border Humanitarian Aid Shipments to Syria," United Nations, July 12, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/07/1427562>

<sup>124</sup> "Russia to Discuss Holding of Sixth Constitutional Committee Meeting During Talks on Syria," TASS, July 7, 2021.  
URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/11840361>

<sup>125</sup> Peltz J., "UN Chief: Cross-Border Aid to Syrians Remains 'Essential,'" The Associated Press, December 16, 2021.  
URL: <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-syria-united-nations-antonio-guterres-28a761abf4c9dcdcafb1a33bcd4b30>

<sup>126</sup> "UN Security Council Extends Authorization for Cross-Border Humanitarian Aid Shipments to Syria," United Nations, July 12, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/07/1427562>

<sup>127</sup> "UN Chief: Without Cross-Border Suppliers, Many Syrians Will not Receive Any Aid," United Nations, June 20, 2022.  
URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/06/1426172>

<sup>128</sup> RIAC and ECFA Workshop "Views of Russia and Egypt on the Situation in Syria," YouTube, April 26, 2022.  
URL: <https://youtu.be/-EvAuFRHj10>

ditions for ensuring the people's survival.<sup>129</sup> This is hampered by a lack of donor assistance, as well as by the sanctions against the Syrian government.

Members of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic have called for a review of the sanctions placed against the country, as well as for sanctions exceptions on humanitarian grounds. The United Nations notes that many countries and companies are unwilling to violate the sanctions regime against Syria, which hampers the delivery of food and medicines to the country.<sup>130</sup> The United States has eased some of its restrictions for foreign organizations, making financial interactions with the Syrian government possible – including in areas not related to the humanitarian sphere.<sup>131</sup> However, these measures still fall short of alleviating the greater humanitarian issue at hand. The conflict in Ukraine means that the United States and the European Union will be far less willing to work with Russia when it comes to easing the sanctions against Syria, even for humanitarian cooperation. Easing sanctions pressure on the Syrian government remains an important component of solving Syria's problems. Economic pressure is unlikely to bring about a political transformation in Syria, seeing as though the decline in the government's economic capacity is directly reflected in the wellbeing of the Syrian people.

While opportunities for cooperation between Russia, the United States and the European Union are limited, the sides can still work together to solve existing humanitarian problems in Syria. It would be wise to keep the dialogue on cross-border mechanisms for delivering humanitarian aid open. It is particularly important to look for possible points of contact in the context of the Kurdish problem, which can quickly escalate and stoke the flames of the Syrian conflict.

Russia-Ukraine conflict has had a negative impact on the Middle East's food security. This is hardly surprising, given that Russia and Ukraine accounted for 28 per cent of global wheat exports in 2021.<sup>132</sup> Even before the conflict, in January 2022, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimated that global food processes increased by 28.1 per cent in 2021 compared to the previous year (FAO Food Price Index of 98.1 in 2020, compared to 125.7 in 2021).<sup>133,134</sup> Global food prices increased by 12.6 per cent in March 2022 compared to February (FAO Food Price Index of 141.2 in February 2022, compared to 159.7 in March 2022).<sup>135</sup>

<sup>129</sup> Belenkaya M., "Two Sides of the Same Syria," *Kommersant*, December 21, 2021.  
URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5141720>.

<sup>130</sup> "UN Commission: War in Ukraine Will Aggravate the Humanitarian Situation in Syria," United Nations, March 9, 2022.  
URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/03/1419532>.

<sup>131</sup> "U.S. Treasury Expands Syria Nongovernmental Organizations General License," U.S. Department of the Treasury, November 24, 2021. URL: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0505>

<sup>132</sup> "Impact of the Ukraine–Russia Conflict on Global Food Security and Related Matters under the Mandate of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)," FAO, May 2022.  
URL: <https://www.fao.org/3/nj164en/nj164en.pdf>

<sup>133</sup> "Global Food Prices Rose 'Sharply' During 2021," United Nations, January 6, 2022.  
URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1109212>

<sup>134</sup> "FAO Food Price Index Posts Significant Leap in March," FAO, April 8, 2020.  
URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/fao-food-price-index-posts-significant-leap-in-march/ru>

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

Prices levelled off somewhat in the first few months following the start of the conflict (FAO Food Price Index of 135.7 in November 2022).<sup>136</sup>

The fighting in Ukraine has caused great damage to the country's transport infrastructure, leading to the suspension of all commercial shipping through Ukrainian ports. The conflict has also affected food exports.<sup>137</sup> Head of the Center for Agrarian Research and Food Security of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Irina Deryugina and Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Igor Matveev told RIAC that the navigational problems in the Azov and Black seas are caused by the armed clashes and the mining and port blockades. This has negatively affected the operation of main logistics chains, hampering grain supplies to countries in the Middle East that need it.<sup>138,139</sup> On top of all that, the conflict in Ukraine has increased volatility on the agricultural commodities markets.

In the absence of physical grain, there also are economic reasons that could exacerbate the food crisis in Middle Eastern and North African countries. The countries that will most suffer are those that import most of their grain from Russia and Ukraine, as well as the more unstable countries in the region – those that are dealing with their own crises and armed conflicts. According to Igor Matveev, changes in food prices could harm the food security of Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, as these countries depend heavily on imports of Russian and Ukrainian grain. Countries facing economic turmoil, such as Lebanon, Libya and Yemen, may also feel the effects of food crises.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, as Igor Matveev noted at a workshop organized by RIAC and the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA), Ukraine suspended grain supplies to Syria in 2016. According to the expert, the problem of food security will affect Lebanon more than it does Syria.<sup>141</sup>

According to Irina Deryugina, Libya, Yemen, Lebanon and Sudan are in a zone of great risk, as the threat of famine is very real in these countries. Iraq and Syria may also be at risk.<sup>142</sup> Interruptions in supplies to Egypt cannot be ruled out either.<sup>143</sup> We should add here that Egypt is the largest importer of wheat in the world, and rising prices for this commodity could mean that the government might have to curtail its bread subsidy programmes.

<sup>136</sup> "FAO Food Price Index Posts Significant Leap in March," FAO, April 8, 2020.

URL: <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/fao-food-price-index-posts-significant-leap-in-march/ru>

<sup>137</sup> "The Importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for Global Agricultural Markets and the Risks Associated with the War in Ukraine," FAO, June 10, 2022. URL: <https://www.fao.org/3/cb9013en/cb9013en.pdf>.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Igor Matveev. June 15, 2022.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Irina Deryugina. June 29, 2022.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Igor Matveev. June 15, 2022.

<sup>141</sup> RIAC and ECFA Workshop "Views of Russia and Egypt on the Situation in Syria," YouTube, April 26, 2022. URL: <https://youtu.be/-EvAuFRHj10>.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Irina Deryugina. June 29, 2022.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

The global community is working to stabilize food prices and prevent hunger in the poorest countries.<sup>144</sup> The “grain deal” worked out by Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations<sup>145</sup> mentioned above, guarantees the safe transportation of Ukrainian grain and food.<sup>146</sup>

The record grain harvest in Russia will likely help to offset the negative consequences of the conflict at least partially.<sup>147</sup> Minister of Agriculture of the Russian Federation Dmitry Patrushev has announced that Russia is willing to supply the poorest countries with up to 500,000 tonnes of grain gratis.<sup>148</sup> It is entirely possible that some Arab countries in the Middle East could make this list.

The food security of the unstable countries of the Middle East and North Africa is under threat. It is important to make sure that food security issues in the MENA countries that have been enveloped by armed conflicts and internal crises and which depend heavily on grain imports do not get any worse. Not only can the food crisis exacerbate existing humanitarian problems, but it could also aggravate social tensions, and this could have unpredictable political consequences.

<sup>144</sup> Sukhorukova E., “The International Agreement on Ukrainian Grain Exports. What You Need to Know,” RBC, July 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/business/22/07/2022/62da8cfd9a794769c00b18e4>.

<sup>145</sup> Russia and Ukraine signed the deal separately.

<sup>146</sup> Sukhorukova E., “The International Agreement on Ukrainian Grain Exports. What You Need to Know,” RBC, July 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/business/22/07/2022/62da8cfd9a794769c00b18e4>.

<sup>147</sup> Keffer L., “Mishustin: Russia Posts Record Grain Haul of 150 Million Tonnes,” Kommersant, November 2, 2022. URL: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5650341>.

<sup>148</sup> Ryumin A., “Patrushev: Russia to Give Away 500,000 Tonnes of Grain to Poorest Countries,” TASS, October 29, 2022. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/16193805>.

# Radicalization

The 2010s proved to be a time of mass upheaval for the Middle East. The Arab Spring started in 2010, leading to civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, an uprising in Bahrain, and unrest in countless other Arab states. On top of that, the problem of terrorism became worse than ever before. In 2013, the Islamic State\* made its presence known, announcing the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in terrorist-controlled territories the following year. After that, the Islamic State\* destabilized the situation in the Middle East and North Africa for several more years, and still poses a threat to these regions.

Terrorists have not been as active in the Middle East in the 2020s compared to the previous decade. Even so, all is in place for the radicalization of Islamist movements and the growth of terrorist activity in some MENA countries. First, the food crisis, which has worsened by the conflict in Ukraine, could aggravate social tensions in Middle Eastern countries and create fertile ground for radical Islamist groups to step up their activities. Second, the fallout from the events of August 2021 in Afghanistan has made the threat of terrorism all the more real. Many radical groups welcomed the Taliban's\* power grab. Al-Qaeda\* was one of them, releasing a statement congratulating the Taliban\* on capturing power in Afghanistan, and calling for a jihad to "liberate Palestine, the Islamic Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen and Kashmir."<sup>149</sup> Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula\* also released a statement congratulating the Taliban\* on their victory and calling the jihad a legitimate way to "expel the invaders."<sup>150</sup> Members of the organization even put on a fireworks show to celebrate the Taliban's\* rise to power in Afghanistan.<sup>151</sup> Hamas and Islamic Jihad\* also congratulated the Taliban\* on their victory.<sup>152</sup>

The Syrian organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham\* also got in on the act of congratulating the Taliban.\* In a statement released to the press, the group expressed the hope that God would also grant the "Syrian revolution" a victory.<sup>153</sup> Irina Zvyagelskaya pointed out that the Islamist organizations in Idlib, Syria, also celebrated the power swap in Afghanistan. According to her, they see the Taliban's\* rise to power as a sign that victory is possible, and that the United States is even retreating under the onslaught of radical Islamist organizations.<sup>154</sup>

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>149</sup> "Al Qaeda sees Taliban's Afghan Victory as Model for Jihadists Elsewhere, Talks of 'Liberation' of Kashmir," The Economic Times, September 2, 2021. URL: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/al-qaeda-sees-talibans-afghanvictory-as-model-for-jihadists-elsewhere-talks-of-liberation-of-kashmir/articleshow/85857688.cms>

<sup>150</sup> "Al-Qaeda in Yemen Congratulates Taliban, Vows to Continue Campaigns," Al Arabiya, August 19, 2021. URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/08/19/Al-Qaeda-in-Yemen-congratulates-Taliban-vows-to-continue-campaigns>

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Boxerman A., "Hamas Praises Taliban for Causing American 'Downfall' in Afghanistan," The Times of Israel, August 16, 2021. URL: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-praises-taliban-for-causing-american-downfall-in-afghanistan/>

<sup>153</sup> Syria's top extremist group HTS hails Taliban takeover of Afghanistan // Al Arabiya. 18.08.2021. URL: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/world/2021/08/18/Syria-s-top-extremist-group-HTS-hails-Taliban-takeover-of-Afghanistan>

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Irina Zvyagelskaya. January 26, 2022.

The Taliban's\* victory may have also emboldened jihadists in the Middle East. According to Vasily Kuznetsov, it is possible that the victory could have been perceived as Islamist revenge: Islamist forces could not get the job done in other regions, but they succeeded in Afghanistan. Looking at it this way, we cannot rule out the impact the demonstration effect may have on terrorist groups and their attempts draw attention to the Islamist alternative.<sup>155</sup> Irina Zvyagelskaya emphasizes the fact that there is an audience in the Middle East that is receptive to those who preach justice and a return to "true Islam" given their lamentable socio-economic situation. At the same time, Zvyagelskaya notes that there is no evidence for an immediate and rapid increase in the number of radical supporters.<sup>156</sup>

The events in Afghanistan may deepen the schism between moderate and radical elements in Islamic movements, some of which are likely to be more inclined towards armed confrontation. These groups in the Middle East, from the Houthis in Yemen to Hamas in Palestine may step up their activities, guided by the Taliban's\* example. There are also concerns that the weapons supplied by the United States to the Ashraf Ghani government have been left in Afghanistan and could end up in the hands of radical groups.

Irina Zvyagelskaya also believes that there are real fears of the Taliban's\* leadership allowing Afghanistan to become a safe haven for terrorists once again.<sup>157</sup> The "Fourteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat" notes that "terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom in Afghanistan than at any time in contemporary history."<sup>158</sup> In addition to Islamic State\* and Al-Qaeda\*, other terrorist groups in the region have swarmed into Afghanistan, including, Jamaat Ansarullah\*, the Turkistan Islamic Party\*, the East Turkistan Islamic Party\* and other factions.<sup>159</sup>

Here, the Taliban's\* connections to Al-Qaeda\* are worth pointing out. In 2015, Al-Qaeda's\* head Ayman al-Zawahiri swore his allegiance to the Taliban\*.<sup>160</sup> While the Taliban\* announced that it would not be providing terrorist organizations with a platform for organizing and carrying out attacks on other countries,<sup>161</sup> there is no guarantee that it will keep its promise. Afghanistan continues to serve as

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Vasily Kuznetsov. December 22, 2021.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Irina Zvyagelskaya. January 26, 2022.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Fourteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat. United Nations Security Council, January 28, 2022.

URL: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2022\\_63\\_E.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2022_63_E.pdf)

<sup>159</sup> "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's address at a plenary session of a meeting between Afghanistan's neighbouring countries (Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), Tunxi, March 31, 2022," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2022. URL: [https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1807302/](https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1807302/)

<sup>160</sup> "Al-Qaeda Leader Swears Fealty to New Taliban Leadership," RBC, August 13, 2015.

URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/55cca2609a79472e7923d61c>.

<sup>161</sup> "Taliban Promises to Not Allow Terrorists to Operate Inside Afghanistan against Other Countries," TASS, August 14, 2021. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12130979>

Al-Qaeda's\* central strategic hub. This much is clear from the fact that Ayman al-Zawahiri was based in Afghanistan until he was killed by a U.S. drone strike in the summer of 2022.<sup>162</sup>

The Islamic State\* also remains active in Afghanistan. On August 27, 2021, the Islamic State\* staged a major terrorist attack at Kabul's International Airport, proving that it still has the ability to carry out such actions.<sup>163</sup> After the Taliban\* released thousands of prisoners in January 2022, the number of Islamic State\* fighters doubled from 2000 to 4000 people.<sup>164</sup> Some former members of the Afghan Army, intelligence agencies and National Directorate of Security joined Islamic State\* in Khorasan province.<sup>165</sup>

As the participants in a workshop co-organized by RIAC and the Center for Strategic Research (SAM) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey noted, if the Taliban\* decides to take Islamic State\* on, it will likely turn to the world community for help. If the international community fails to find a solution, the situation will only worsen.<sup>166</sup> It will be complicated by the fact that not all Taliban\* members are willing to fight the Islamic State\* and Al-Qaeda\*. The movement is not homogeneous, and some Taliban\* members collaborate with the Islamic State\*. Not only that, the Taliban\* never pledged to eliminate or even fight Al-Qaeda\*. As a result, Afghanistan can be used as an encampment centre for members of fundamentalist groups.<sup>167</sup>

The Islamic State\* and Al-Qaeda\* may even use Afghanistan's territory as a springboard for launching their Islamist projects. In these conditions, the Taliban\* could try to absolve themselves of responsibility, citing the lack of assistance from the international community. This would entail the Taliban\* breaking its promise that Afghan territory would not be used as a breeding ground for terrorist attacks, and that the Taliban\* would not facilitate terrorist activities.<sup>168</sup>

The ruling Taliban\* in Afghanistan wants the country to continue to receive economic assistance. They also want to be integrated into the system of international relations. To achieve both, the Taliban\* movement must prevent Afghanistan from turning into a territory where radical elements are reinforced, which can become a source of extremism. While the process of integration into the

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>162</sup> Yawar M., Ali I., Mason J., "U.S. kills al Qaeda Leader Zawahiri in Kabul Drone Missile Strike," Reuters, August 3, 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-carried-out-drone-strike-afghanistan-us-officials-say-2022-08-01/>

<sup>163</sup> Hashemi S., Faiez R., Baldor L., Krauss J., "Kabul Airport Attack Kills 60 Afghans, 13 US Troops," The Associated Press, August 27, 2022. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/europe-france-evacuations-kabul-9e457201e5bbe75a4eb1901fedeee7a1>

<sup>164</sup> Fourteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat. United Nations Security Council, January 28, 2022. URL: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2022\\_63\\_E.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2022_63_E.pdf)

<sup>165</sup> Afghanistan Country Focus. European Asylum Support Office. January 2022. URL: [https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2022\\_01\\_EASO\\_COI\\_Report\\_Afghanistan\\_Country\\_focus.pdf](https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2022_01_EASO_COI_Report_Afghanistan_Country_focus.pdf)

<sup>166</sup> RIAC-SAM Round Table "Views of Russia and Turkey on the Situation in Afghanistan." December 13, 2021.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

world community will be extremely difficult, the Taliban\* will do their best to make this happen.<sup>169</sup>

What happens in Afghanistan directly affects the region as a whole. Terrorist groups maintain their influence in the country and pose a threat to Afghanistan and its neighbours. It seems likely that Islamic State\* will attempt to eliminate moderate Taliban\* members.<sup>170</sup>

It should also be noted that terrorists also maintain a strong presence in other Middle Eastern countries. Syria and Iraq alone host some 6000–10,000 Islamic State\* fighters.<sup>171</sup>

The participants in the “RCD Forum 2022: The World is Changing” international forum in Baghdad in September 2022 noted that terrorism is one of the key security challenges facing Iraq. The experts at the forum stressed that Iraq currently does not have the capability to eliminate Islamic State\* cells completely.<sup>172</sup>

As for Syria, the prisons – where tens of thousands of prisoners are detained – pose a serious threat. This includes not only about penitentiaries controlled by the government, but also the prisons run by the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian National Army and the Syrian Democratic Forces.<sup>173</sup> These prisons can be used as breeding grounds for jihadist ideas, a platform for spreading radical Islam ideologies and recruiting new supporters. These are the places where jihadists often hatch their plans for terrorist attacks.<sup>174</sup>

In January 2022, Islamic State\* militants attacked al-Sinaa Prison in north-eastern Syria.<sup>175</sup> The goal was to help free thousands of prisoners with suspected ties to the Islamic State\*.<sup>176</sup> According to the UN Human Rights Office, this was the biggest Islamic State\* offensive since 2019.<sup>177</sup>

In an interview with RIAC, Vasily Kuznetsov pointed to the fact that the traumatic memories of Islamic State\* and the surge in violence it brought during the 2010s are still fresh in the minds of the people of the Middle East, which certainly limits

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Vasily Kuznetsov. December 22, 2021.

<sup>170</sup> RIAC–SAM Round Table “Views of Russia and Turkey on the Situation in Afghanistan.” December 13, 2021.

<sup>171</sup> Fourteenth Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat. United Nations Security Council, January 28, 2022.

URL: [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IS\\_2022\\_63\\_E.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IS_2022_63_E.pdf)

<sup>172</sup> This was noted by several experts at the “RCD Forum 2022: The World is Changing” forum. September 2022.

<sup>173</sup> “Tens of Thousands of Civilians are Being Held in Syrian Prisons without Due Process,” United Nations, March 1, 2021.

URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2021/03/1397772>

<sup>174</sup> The Jihadi Threat: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and Beyond, USIP, December 2016/January 2017.

URL: <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/The-Jihadi-Threat-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-and-Beyond.pdf>

<sup>175</sup> “Northeastern Syria: Internally Displaced Persons Return Home,” United Nations, February 14, 2022.

URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/02/1418222>

<sup>176</sup> “Pederson at the UN Security Council: It’s Time to Start Negotiations that Could Change the Dynamics of the Conflict in Syria,” United Nations, January 26, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/01/1417482>

<sup>177</sup> “Northeastern Syria: IS Fighters Escape from Prison, Fighting Escalates, Thousands of People Displaced from Their Homes,” United Nations, January 25, 2022. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2022/01/1417432>



the popularity of Islamist and radical projects in the region. Thus, we cannot say with any degree of certainty just how attractive radical ideas are in the Middle East. In fact, the demonstration effect may instead manifest itself in other regions, for example Southeast and Central Asia.<sup>178</sup> The participants in a RIAC–SAM workshop also noted that many Al-Qaeda\* terrorists are relocating from the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia. According to experts, India and Iran may be the first targets of the Islamic State\*, Al-Qaeda\* and other terrorist groups.<sup>179</sup>

The flight of terrorists to other regions may also be explained by another factor; namely, they have become easily identifiable in the Middle East and their activities are thus suppressed there. Greater control must be exercised over terrorist movements in order to ensure that they do not leave the countries where they are based, and in which operations are being carried out to eliminate them.

Countries that want to prevent Islamic radicalization and the growth terrorism could learn a lot from Morocco, a state that has achieved great success in this area in recent years. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2022, Morocco is now the safest country in the MENA region in terms of the level of terrorist threats.<sup>180</sup>

Morocco is implementing a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism and citizen radicalization. The country's security services place special emphasis on preventing terrorism and extremism. Morocco is also actively developing cooperation with its international partners. This includes exchanging information about possible terrorist threats, including through intelligence services.<sup>181</sup> Morocco successfully combines harsh responses to terrorism with soft tactics. Specifically, the government focuses on educational outreach projects, fighting unemployment (especially among the youth), and implementing programmes that help the economically disadvantaged.<sup>182</sup> Additionally, the government has set up programmes aimed at discussing social and religious topics with young people.<sup>183</sup> The idea is to prevent them from being radicalized at a young age. Particularly noteworthy here is the training programme for imams, which teaches them to resist radical narratives.<sup>184</sup> Another successful deradicalization programme in the Middle East is run by Saudi Arabia; it focuses on prevention, rehabilitation and aftercare (hence its name, PRAC).<sup>185</sup>

In the fight against terrorism, Middle Eastern countries must focus on boosting intelligence and eliminate terrorist cells while they are still in the process of

<sup>178</sup> Interview with Vasily Kuznetsov. December 22, 2021.

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<sup>179</sup> RIAC–SAM Round Table "Views of Russia and Turkey on the Situation in Afghanistan." December 13, 2021.

<sup>180</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace. *Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, March 2022, p. 8.

<sup>181</sup> Mansour-Ille D., "Counterterrorism Policies in the Middle East and North Africa: A Regional Perspective," International Committee of the Red Cross, February 2022.  
URL: <https://international-review.icrc.org/articles/counterterrorism-policies-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-916>.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Morocco. U.S. Department of State.  
URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/morocco/>

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Boucek C., "Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2008. URL: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp97\\_boucek\\_saudi\\_final.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp97_boucek_saudi_final.pdf)

being set up. It is important to establish high level coordination and a system for exchanging information both between departments in individual countries and at the inter-state level. Such information could include lists of people linked to terrorism and extremism. It is also necessary to constantly improve technical capabilities and ensure a high level of cybersecurity. This is especially important given that terrorists are likely to be tech-savvy, using digital tools to recruit people on social networks and instant messengers.<sup>186</sup>

To sum up, there are no grounds at present to claim that there has been a sudden and significant increase in the number of people sympathetic to radical ideas in the Middle East. However, the Taliban's\* rise to power in Afghanistan and the knock-on effect of conflict in Ukraine regarding food security, creates additional conditions for the radicalization of Islamist movements and the growth of the terrorism. In the foreseeable future, we can expect to see an increase in the activity of terrorist groups, including those based outside the Middle East.

<sup>186</sup> Les Heras P., "How Does ISIS Recruit its Members?" Universidad de Navarra, March 21, 2022.  
URL: <https://en.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/como-recluta-el-isis-a-sus-miembros>

\* An organization whose activities are banned in the Russian Federation.

# Conclusion

The Taliban's\* take over in Afghanistan in August 2021 and the conflict in Ukraine that began in February 2022 have both impacted a number of key regional trends in the Middle East. Specifically, the period from 2021 to 2022 confirmed that the United States was switching to a policy course of resource *optimization* in the Middle East, all while maintaining its operational capabilities. There is little evidence to suggest that Washington has abandoned the Middle East entirely, as it continues to maintain U.S. military bases in the region. The level of military-political and military-technical cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, including the Arab monarchies, Israel, Egypt and Jordan, also remains high. At the same time, U.S. optimization is forcing some countries (the Persian monarchies in particular) to diversify their sources of security. This could play a role in the development of military-technical cooperation between Russia and the countries of the Arab East, although the conflict with Ukraine also creates a number of obstacles to this development. Particularly, Middle Eastern countries fear possible sanctions and military assistance programme suspension if they pursue any cooperation with Russia.

Numerous Middle Eastern countries are rightly concerned that the United States will not be able to ensure their security in the event of a major regional conflict. This is an especially important point for them given that Iran is busy strengthening its own military potential. A solution to this predicament was found in the regional *normalization* of relations between rivals. This process was set in motion several years before the United States had pulled its troops out of Afghanistan. Key to this was the signing of the Abraham Accords in September 2020 (a response to the shelling by the Houthis of oil refineries in Saudi Arabia in 2019), which was an important step to building relations with Israel. Negotiations were launched in several areas following the events of August 2021, including those with Iran and Turkey. All this creates a favourable political background, which allows for some degree of cautious optimism that the parties will learn to settle their differences – no matter how serious they may be – at the negotiating table, rather than resorting to military means.

At the same time, the Taliban's\* power grab in Afghanistan and the conflict in Ukraine have brought about a *transformation* in Middle Eastern country relations. In particular, Iran, Turkey and Qatar (which has become a fundamental player in the resolution of the Afghan problem) have acquired leading roles in the region. The prospects for resolving the Iranian nuclear problem call for special attention. At the same time, Iran's issues with certain Arab countries, including Israel, extend beyond the issue of nuclear weapons. This is why regional players would do well to open a dialogue with Iran, aiming to find a comprehensive solution to the region's security problems, which would encompass both the Iranian nuclear programme and steps to reduce threats as a whole. Normalizing relations between

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Iran and its rivals could reduce tensions in the Middle East, which would be an additional argument in favour of reducing U.S. activity in the region.

Preventing a major war between Iran and Israel may become a priority for players inside and outside the region. The two countries see each other as an existential threat, and if Iran comes close to building a nuclear bomb, it is possible that Israel could strike first.

Turkey's influence in the region grew in 2021–2022. First, the Taliban's\* rise to power in Afghanistan provided a perfect opportunity for Ankara to strengthen its positions in the country and regionally. Second, the conflict in Ukraine allowed Turkey to step up as a mediator in negotiations and to increase its role as an important transit zone. Nowhere was this more evident than in Turkey's work to ensure the signing of the “grain deal,” which reduced the threat to food security in the region and beyond.

The Taliban's\* rise to power in Afghanistan also contributed to the migration crisis in the region. Both have exacerbated humanitarian problems in numerous countries in the Middle East, which could further affect the *humanitarian situation* in the region in the medium term. All this is also happening against the background of a global food crisis that has been amplified by the conflict in Ukraine. In these conditions, efforts to provide humanitarian assistance must intensify, and economic recovery projects need to be launched in those countries that have been ravaged by armed conflicts (including Syria). However, the sanctions imposed against the Syrian government complicate this considerably. At the same time, it is unlikely that they will bring about any kind of political transformation to the country. Work should be done to implement humanitarian exemptions for the existing sanctions and get the financial restrictions on Syria lifted. It is also important to maintain dialogue on cross-border mechanisms for the supply of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people. If this mechanism is curtailed, there is no guarantee that deliveries to areas not controlled by the Syrian government will not be suspended. Additionally, the United Nations will not be able to ensure that the goods entering the north-west part of the country will be exclusively used for humanitarian needs.

Maintaining dialogue on initiatives preventing food prices from skyrocketing and to help the poorest countries overcome their food security problems continues to be a priority. This applies to the agreements reached within the framework of the “grain deal.” Aggregating food problems can lead to increased social tensions, which, in turn, could become fertile ground for the *radicalization* of Islamist movements and the growth of terrorist activity in some Middle Eastern countries.

The Taliban's\* success in Afghanistan has likely inspired other extremist groups, which may use this as a reason to step up their terrorist activities in the future. This is a threat to regional security. We must not forget that terrorist groups, including the Islamic State\*, remain in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq and may, in light of the ongoing global problems, try to destabilize the situation in individual countries. Middle Eastern countries need to be proactive, as do extra-regional powers. It is in

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the interests of all regional and extra-regional players to adopt effective counter-terrorist practices, which will, in turn, prevent a destabilized Middle East.

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