

VITALY NAUMKIN

Scientific Director of the Oriental Studies Institute, Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

We will now give the floor to Vitaly Naumkin, because everybody today recognises, firstly, that Russia has a long historical experience of these problems, going back at least to the 1970s, the 1980s and probably before. Secondly, everybody recognises today the importance of some sort of cooperation, not to say alliance, with your country.

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I would also like to start with my condolences to the French people and my thanks to Egypt, who placed not only the French flag over the pyramids but also the Lebanese and the Russian ones. Starting with this new reality in the Middle East, it is clearly alarming not only because of the terrorist threat but also due to a lot of other things. We know about all this popular unrest and the popular grievances that led to the Arab revolutions, but there are other features which are alarming. It is clear that the Arab world is a set of deeply divided societies that are witnessing a very deep crisis of identity and in the whole concept of nation state. Some analysts in the region are even speaking about the end of the Sykes-Picot system and so on. I am not very supportive of this statement, but it is still a real crisis and we have to do something about it.

We have to understand the future of the Middle East not only through the lens of terrorism and extremism but also through the lens of this crisis and how to solve it. We have several failed states, especially Libya, Yemen, Syria and to a certain degree Iraq. I am in favour of finding some sort of comprehensive solution to the Syrian and Iraqi crises together, because I am afraid that only finding a solution to the Syrian crisis will not be enough to deal with this part of the world. What is happening there is very worrisome. Significant parts of Syria and Iraq are still ruled by this Islamic State, which is not only a terrorist organisation but a new concept of nation-building, and sometimes it looks attractive to a lot of people.

We can repeat endlessly the mantra that this has nothing to do with Islam, that Islam is nice, but all religions are nice, and Islam of course is a great religion, but these people are presenting exclusivist interpretations of Islam. There are not a lot of forces at play within the Muslim world, and we are a part of it, because we have 20 million Muslims, mostly Sunnis, in Russia. Sometimes the teachers of Islam cannot defeat these exclusivist interpretations of Islam. Let us be fair – if we say that 300,000 people have been killed, half of them are Islamists and half of them are the Syrian Army and the people loyal to the regime, especially Alawis. Let us not forget that during the ten years of the presence of coalition forces in Iraq, around 600,000 people were killed there. Let us not forget about that; I am not accusing anyone, but it was very difficult for the coalition forces to protect these people. Let us not forget that out of two million Christians only a tenth are left, not more than 200,000.

It is a real tragedy, and speaking about coexistence and peaceful solutions, we cannot forget about it. Excuse me for jumping from one subject to another, but we have to speak also about the Vienna Process, which is very promising and means that we can work together through making concessions, but it is still difficult, even if we all agree about the nature of the future Syrian state. It is secular, but a lot of forces within Syrian society who are against this secular vision of the state. We are speaking about the rights of ethnic minorities, and by the way, our President in his recent speech on Syria also mentioned the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, but Arab nationalists, who are a very significant segment of Syrian society, including the regime forces, are against this vision. They say it is a unitary state, meaning that there are no minorities; this word cannot be used, only “components”, mukawwinat.



When I chaired two series of inter-Syrian talks in Moscow in January and April, there was an acute debate between the Kurds, who spoke about their self-rule within Syria, and the governmental delegation supported by some opposition groups. It is not easy to find a solution to that, but it will be a highly centralised state, as it has been for all these years, or it will be decentralised. It is up to them to discuss, of course, and the contact group will be helpful.

I like this notion of a contact group, by the way. It worked with the Iranian nuclear programme; we badly need to create such a group on Libya, because the institution of the High Representative and the Secretary General is not working properly, with all due respect to Ambassador Bernardino Leon. That is my personal view. It is promising, but even with the small issue of who are terrorists, our French friends and ourselves understand who the terrorists are, but if you come to the negotiations, a couple of days ago I came back from the UAE, and for them Hezbollah is a terrorist group, whereas for the Turks it is PYD and YPG, which is supported by the Americans and the Russians. It is the Muslim Brotherhood for the Egyptians. What do we do with all that? I do not know. It can be solved, but it needs a lot of patience and a lot of diplomatic skills and readiness to make compromises in favour of finding adequate solutions.

Coming back to the ideas that were mentioned here about what to do, I agree that we can find solutions to this crisis of four failed states, but given the very shaky situation in terms of this nation state concept, it will be very difficult to accommodate it to the new realities, whether the borders between the states will remain the same, or, as some people believe, they will inevitably be changed. A lot of people are speaking about the creation of an independent Kurdish state, whether in one country or, as is more likely, in a number of countries. We can all feel this very strong desire to build independence, and we already have at least two states in Iraq and Syria where we can see quasi-independent entities. What will happen to them? Can we envisage the preservation of a unitary state under the auspices of a federal constitutional order or something else? I do not know, but it needs a lot of patience and creative thinking.

Coming back to ending violence in Syria, we all agree that it is needed. How can we do it? The main desire of the people who gathered in Vienna was to provide for a national ceasefire, and a lot of people doubt whether this is possible with the existence of these terrorist groups, which are dispersed all over the country, though our American partners, especially Secretary Kerry, stress the importance of this national ceasefire. We supported that, but at the same time our experts have a lot of doubts about the possibility of providing for a ceasefire, and I am also unsure whether local ceasefires can be imposed instead. However, that these exclusivist visions of Islam provided by these terrorists, and especially the so-called Islamic State or Daesh and some other groups, are a threat because they have a lot of supporters.

This threat is very important for Russia, because no less than 2,500 jihadists went to fight in the ranks of Daesh and not less than 4,000 from Central Asia, and this is an army which might return if they remain alive, the same problem that these returnees made for France and other European nations. They celebrate their terrorist attacks, and in their social networks they say that they have managed to change Europe; and they are proud of this.

I will finish with one thing. We have to understand these realities on the ground and the mentalities of these people in terms of why they are so attractive to a young generation of people living in Europe, the US, Russia, everywhere, and why they are coming there to die. One of our Deputies, members of Parliament, asked me just yesterday what I thought of the proposal by a group of Deputies to introduce the death penalty for terrorists. I told him that, regardless of our European obligations, it was the best service to the terrorists, because these people are ready to die. These people are not afraid of that. They see your death penalty as a door to paradise. We have to understand this logic and to do something about it, and not only by using aircraft and troops on the ground to combat these crazy people.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

Thank you very much. I have one factual question and one slightly less factual one for you. The factual question is: Am I mistaken that there are 100,000 mixed couples of Syrians and Russians? Is that correct?

Vitaly NAUMKIN, Scientific Director of the Oriental Studies Institute, Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences

Yes.

Thierry de MONTBRIAL, Founder and Chairman of the WPC

That is a very important figure that very few people are aware of and which certainly explains a number of geopolitical facts. My other question is as follows. You say that each country has its own preferred terrorists, so to speak, but when you face a very complex situation you have to put a hierarchy in place. Is it true or untrue from the Russian viewpoint, from your viewpoint, that ISIS or Daesh is a more fundamental threat than other terrorist groups?

Vitaly NAUMKIN, Scientific Director of the Oriental Studies Institute, Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences

No, I do not think so. Nusra is of the same importance in terms of threats coming from both its ideology and military or terrorist activities. They are very well-organised and well-trained in terms of projecting their activity abroad, and their links to Al-Qaida are well-known. That is why we disagree with those who are in favour of mitigating their attitude towards al-Nusra and are trying to convince them to disassociate from al-Qaida and to approach them like a more moderate organisation, which is not acceptable at all.

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Therefore, the lack of agreement about priorities is one of the problems in the way of a coalition.

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Yes.