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We also have with us from Moscow, Professor Vitaly Naumkin, who is President of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Senior Political Advisor to the SRSG on Syria, and a Professor at Moscow State University. As we know, Russia is a player in the region, and I give you the floor for your point of view.

Vitaly Naumkin

It is a great honor and privilege to be with you and to speak to this distinguished audience. I am talking about Russia's role in the realm of the presence of external powers there. We can see that over the last few years, the Middle East has come back as a priority in Russian foreign policy. That is because first Russia started to establish itself as one of the most important players in the world as well as global players in the Middle East. Then, there is the fact that Russia's ties with the Middle East are historic and there has been a legacy of very deep relations and links between the Russian and Middle East people. If we compare what is happening now in the realm of Russia's presence and relations with Middle Eastern states in the nineties, for example, when Russia almost disappeared off the scene in this region, we can see a big difference.

However, we cannot say that Russia has returned to the Middle East. We can say that Russia successfully upgraded its presence, so its influence in the Middle East and starting from 2015 we can see the new face of Russia's relations with the Middle East. We can say it is a bit proactive and it started with the presence of the Russian air forces and their operation in Syria. Speaking about the goals of interest present, we can see that it is mostly the same interests as my colleagues talked about with the other external powers. I can say cooperation between Russia and the Middle East economically, politically and even militarily, given the perhaps in the event where Russia needs some moderate facilities for serving its fleet in the Mediterranean. That is why Russia has based its interest fulfilling this role but it is a secondary goal. The first goal, of course, is in the interests of stability in the Middle East, security and decision because it is very close to the borders of Russia's partners in Central Asia and the Caucasus. We can also see that non-Arab states have started to be probably the most important partners of Russia at the beginning of this space and then the other states have entered the group of Russia's closest partners.

If we speak about Turkey, for example, as one of the non-Arab partners, there are the most amazing, it is the most important contracts and projects like nuclear power stations or land for

the Turkish streamed gas pipeline. Even if we take the volume of tourists, just before the pandemic in 2019 the number of tourists from Russia to Turkey had reached seven million and there are a lot of other things as well. In particular, there is turning Turkey into the gas hub to export Russia's gas to Europe. Another of Russia's goals is to deter the different groups from this region unfortunately especially terrorist and religious extremism. We can say that the relative calm in Syria, regardless of what others think about that, is also the result of Russia's relative success in ridding this country of Daesh.

We can see some other important links between Russia and the region. I think it is also due to Russia's ability to adjust the growing role of regional processes and dynamics. It is ridiculous to play with regional powers that do not need you. We can see that it is built upon Russia's practice of reaching out to multiple partners and a non-ideological approach and pragmatism. We can see that Russia is trying to build relationships with all the players, with different partners and states, for example, Iran and Israel, on an equal basis. At the same time, our approach is made interesting and, we have no colonial legacy, which helps us in this relationship. Russia does not seek to replace or to compete with some global powers, especially the United States. It has no desire or ability, I would say, to compete with the United States but Russia has its own place. I can see that after what happened in Afghanistan there might also be some new role for Russia, I am not going to use expressions like the United States defeat or something like that. No, it is a strategic new stake and there is also some lost trust in the United States, as we all know. Russia is not going to capitalize on this but at the same time we can see some kind of readiness from regional partners to work more closely with Russia. I think it is quite possible and even during the pandemic because the Russian vaccine worked well and is being used in this region, I can mention the so-called new partners of Russia, new friends, especially the Gulf states. For example, Egypt has long been a partner and friend and the same is true of Syria and Iraq, but Israel is also a new partner. Iran is the same and the Gulf states are also the same.

One example of how Russia is trying to help its different partners or different players I should say, even those who are not very friendly to Russia, is our dialogue with the Taliban. This is despite the fact that the Taliban is on the list of terrorist organizations and still are and now nobody is going to take them out of this place, and we will see what is going to happen. I also think that given our relationships with other outside powers, we have very difficult and complicated relationships with the West in general and especially with the United States, but we still have some limited calculation when it is necessary. There was some preparation with the United States and exchanges of information about terrorists. Russia's proposals regarding the establishment of a new regional security system which enjoys support from not all but some partners who are thinking seriously about that. I can also say that some regional conflicts that are often neglected now by many global and international operators, like the Palestinian-Israel conflict, are a focus of Russian diplomacy. Russia believes that without a solution to the Palestinian problem, no peace can be achieved in the Middle East.

Coming back to the recent developments of Russia's relations with Middle East partners, I can blame oil and gas calculation with states like Saudi Arabia, our deep calculation in the oil market. We have a very good relationship with the United Arab Emirates, which is a reliable and very good partner for Russia in many fields. I think that I will stop here, and I am ready to answer your questions. Thank you for your attention.