

DEBATE

Steven Erlanger, Chief Diplomatic Correspondent, Europe, for *The New York Times*

I promised that even though we started late we would finish at the agreed time, which means we have 11 minutes, and I would like to take some questions. Address them to whomever you like because I would like to give the panel at least a couple of minutes to respond. It has been a very rich conversation, but it is hard to find a theme.

Ygor Yurgens, Scientific Director of MGIMO Centre for Sustainable Development and ESG Transformation

My question is for Mr. Rabinovich. We were made to believe that Assad, his regime and power, would be dead without the Russian army. What happens now when Russia's hands are full with another war and what happens with the Turkish-Iranian confrontation there, and the Kurdish question?

Joseph Maila, Geopolitics and International Relations professor at ESSEC Business School

Thanks to the panelists for these wonderful presentations. I would like to make a very short comment on what is happening in the Middle East today. I see it as a very contrasted situation with on the one hand the Abraham Accords, which have triggered such a tremendous change in the area, and we are witnessing an unseen cooperation between Israel and the countries of the region. On the other hand, we still have questions that are unsettled. May I remind you that we have the Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian, Yemeni and Iraqi issues, which are still pending. My question for the panelists here is about a very worrying thing. As Mona rightly pointed out, we are witnessing de regionalization of the Middle East. The intervention of the so-called superpowers no longer exists, the fading presence of Russia or even of the United States. What is worrisome is that we have no regional institutions in this region that could bring about a settlement of all these conflicts. You have the European Union, the ASEAN, NATO, but from your point of view what power in this region might be able to bring about changes or settlements?

Hiroyuki Akita, Commentator of *Nikkei*, Japan

My question is about the Arab state's relations with Russia. I understand that the Arab states have been taking a balanced approach between the West and Russia. As the Russian military situation increasingly deteriorates in Ukraine, will that affect the distance between Russia and the Arab countries?

Jim Bittermann, Senior European correspondent in Paris for CNN

It is just a question for the panel in general and it was a great panel, a great discussion. When you start out talking about hyper-pragmatism and move on to polygamy and then the desire to stability, those of us in the room of a certain age have a fondness and nostalgia for NATO, the grand institutions. How do you square that circle, how can you have stability by making hyper-pragmatic deals and having multiple lovers?

Steven Erlanger

Thank you, a very good question. I am afraid we are not going to have tons of time, so I am going back to the panel, ask you each to respond as you like for no more than two minutes.

Memduh Karakullukçu, Founding Board member of the Global Relations Forum, Founding Partner of Kanunum, Chairman of Kroton Consulting

On the situation in Syria, I think when/if the Russians recede it will create a new constellation and that constellation could work to put the pieces together. There are two things, Syria's territorial integrity and not having Iran in Syria, and those two things can actually align quite a few actors on the field. I think the US, Turkey, what remains of a Russian presence, can be aligned. When I talked about Turkey not engaging in a war in Syria, what I meant is that Turkey will not be in an outright war but what is very clear, consistent and continuous from the beginning, is that Turkey insists on the security of its southern border. We have these sporadic incursions to ensure that and what is pragmatic about President Erdogan's approach is that he waits for timing when the stars are aligned to find the point of least resistance. I think we are very close to that point because of the reasons I mentioned.

Second, with the hyper-pragmatism, I think you are absolutely right, it is very difficult to hold it together. Now that we have some room for maneuver because the oil prices, the Ukrainian situation are creating some room for Turkey, this can work for a while. However, I think in the long run it cannot and this is a phase, and we will go back to the search for stability. That is why I think it is critical that the Europeans do not feel they are being left out of a fast bargain game, they should just hold on to their guns, their time will come. We should not lose credibility in the European ability for structures.

Gilles Kepel, Director of the Middle East-Mediterranean Chair of the École normale supérieure, Professor at Paris Sciences et Lettres, Special Envoy of President Macron for the Middle East

In an attempt to answer Joseph Maïla's question, I wonder whether what remains of a regional institution, the only that remains to some extent is the GCC and of course, I would like to turn to Abdulaziz for more comments. Everybody considered that the GCC was dead and buried because of the Qatar blockade, but this ended for a number of reasons many of you know about. When Xi came to the region he came to Saudi Arabia, and all the regional powers or non-powers gathered in Saudi Arabia. Seen from China, the place everyone was 'summoned' to come was the Arabian Peninsula, so to a large extent the financial center of the region is increasingly its political center. Particularly at a time when resources are scarce, the price of commodities is growing, and hyperinflation is growing, the position of power in this part of the region is

significantly increasingly. That would be my gut feeling, but I would like to hear it from the horse's mouth. I am not saying you are a horse, of course, Abdulaziz.

Mona Makram Ebeid, Egyptian Senator, Advisor to the UN High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations

I would also like to answer Joseph Maïla's question. We do have institutions, unfortunately, the main one, the Arab League is impotent and the only one we can look to is the GCC, which we thought was the one that resembled most the European Union, so we hope that they will continue to do so. I want to say that the main thing that exists and nobody mentioned it much, is the need of people in the region for religious institutions to change to be more pragmatic, to have the dialogue on reform that President Sissi asked for four years ago; unfortunately, this is not happening. Another thing is that Islamic extremism is very well entrenched in many societal institutions in Egypt in particular.

Itmar Rabinovich, Vice Chairman of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution, former Chief Negotiator with Syria

To Ygor's question, I think first of all Turkey has practically annexed about 8% of Syria and it will continue to hold on to this territory. Let us bear in mind that Turkey is the one preventing Russia and Syria from conquering the province of Idlib in which you still have 50 000 Jihadis. Turkey does not want an attack on Idlib because it will send another million refugees into their territory, so it remains involved in a big way. As for the impact of a potential reduction of Russia's presence in Syria, there is a very close relationship between Russia and Iran now, in Syria and Ukraine. The greater the decline of the Russian presence and influence in Syria, the greater that of Iran. The difference is that Russia wants influence in Syria, Iran wants to penetrate Syria to change the country in a very profound way.

Briefly to Jim Bittermann's question, I am afraid I see more instability because there is another factor at work, which is population explosion. There are 320 million people in the Arab world today and the numbers are growing, mostly in the non-rich Arab countries, and this will create further instability in years to come.

Steven Erlanger

They are also very young.

Abdulaziz Othman Sager, Founder and Chairman of the Gulf Research Center

Let me answer with two things, I think in January 2021 when we had the GCC summit in Al-Ula, I think it was clearly stated that we had resolved a lot of the disputes and differences that occurred between Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar. As a Gulf citizen, I am really happy to see that the relationship is back to normal and even better. Last week we saw the visit of His Highness Mohammed Bin Zayed to Qatar, and we have seen the Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman in Qatar for the World Cup opening ceremony. That also makes us feel that what brings us together is more than the differences. There are several initiatives in terms of regional security, which include the US's which was rejected by the Iranians because they thought it was against them. The Russian initiative was rejected by the Americans. Although the Iranian initiative was based on non-intervention and non-aggression, it was rejected because they do

not want to ignore the past and just work from today and going forward. They do not want to deal with Hezbollah's interventions in Syria. By the way, in Syria because of the Israeli military attack on the Iranian presence in Syria that has reduced Iranian capabilities from the beginning to almost 20% today. Neither the Israeli's nor the Iranians talk about it, but it is the reality on the ground and the Russians are providing clear rules of engagement in terms of military action from the Israelis, again it is the Iranian presence in Syria. From a national security point of view, we understand the Turkish interest in north Syria because there is no way we would support a separatist group like the PKK, because we also have a serious situation here in the region if we do. However, we hope that will end soon and that Turkey will try to end it as fast as possible. We also now have the Chinese coming up with an initiative, but that we are not sure that it works so we have the American, Russian, Iranian, Chinese and the European, but the European's focus is on maritime security. In any initiative in the region, we need three preconditions. First, we need inclusiveness, so it must include Israel, Iran, Turkey. We cannot exclude any of them. Second, we need to resolve the current problems in the region. We cannot go into a security architecture in the region when we have a militia supported by Russia in Libya, a militia supported by Iran in Iraq, etc. Third we need a guarantor which cannot only be the UN. We need the Security Council and the UN to find the right formula of guarantor to provide a security architecture. By the way, look at the difference in wording. The summit in Jeddha attended by Biden was called "Development and Security" whereas we called the summit with the Chinese "Development and Sustainability". Thank you.

Steven Erlanger

Thank you. If I may, let me thank Thierry, Song-Nim, the organizers, the hosts and especially the translators who have been working very hard and did such a wonderful job so applaud them also as we applaud the panelists.