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OLGA BIBIKOVA. PROBLEMS OF LEBANON, SYRIA AND JORDAN AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF FOREIGN POLICY CHANGES IN THE REGION

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Abstract. Until recently, when considering the position of the Arab countries in relation to Russia, it was necessary to take into account their ties with the United States. Today the situation has changed. At the same time, the “Arab street” is predictably supporting Russia. The formation of a more independent view of the ruling elites on what is happening in Ukraine has become a new factor in Middle East politics. A comparative analysis of the policies of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan makes it possible to understand the factors that influenced the development of the positions of these countries regarding the SMO.

Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine was met with mixed reactions in the Middle East. At the UN, representatives of the Arab countries for the most part supported the resolutions condemning Russia. Over time, some representatives began to avoid voting or to explain to Russian diplomats behind the scenes that it was impossible to vote otherwise due to pressure from Western countries.

However, inside the Arab states, despite the lack of complete and truthful information about what was happening, a different opinion was formed, which was predetermined by the growth of anti-American sentiment, which intensified against the backdrop of the events of recent decades in Iraq and Syria, as well as a result of Washington's consistent persecution of Iran and Shiite organizations (including in the Arab countries) which took part in the fight against ISIS.

Not the last role was played by the authority of Russia and its predecessor, the USSR, which traditionally advocated the interests of the Arab countries. Thus, the reaction of the Arab countries to the Russian Special Military Operation in Ukraine was not what the West expected. Most of the Arab countries, thanks to the consistent policy of our diplomacy, quickly realized that the United States and NATO are behind Ukraine's actions.

In the future, the rapprochement occurred between Russia and some Arabian states to the detriment of the United States, as well as the emergence of China as a new player on the map of the region, raised hopes for the stabilization of the situation (including in Syria, Yemen and Iraq) and the economic recovery of the region. In addition, China, by taking over the organization of diplomatic contacts between Tehran and Riyadh, has achieved significant results on the path of reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this context, conflict situations in the Middle East were reconsidered and plans were outlined to resolve them.

Nevertheless, within the framework of the UN General Assembly, most of the Arab countries condemned the Russia's SMO that began in Ukraine. Thus, on February 24, 2022, the

Lebanese Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, calling them an "invasion", and called on Moscow to immediately stop hostilities. Then Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Buhabib tried to soften his position in the *Nida al-Watan* newspaper, saying that with regard to the events in Ukraine, Lebanon stands for the observance of the basic principles of international law. It is curious that this statement was condemned by representatives of the Lebanese diaspora in Moscow. And a little later, Ali Hamia, the Lebanese labor minister, said that the minister's opinion was not agreed with the government. The absence of a clear position of the Lebanese government can be explained by the fact that Lebanon at that time was on the eve of the end of the presidential term. Michel Aoun, who was then head of the state (from 10/31/2016 to 10/30/2022), wanted to see his son-in-law Gibran Basil, the leader of the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, as the successor. However, the latter in November 2020 fell under US sanctions. He was accused of corruption and links to the Hezbollah organization.¹ Supporting the accusations against Russia, as some leaders of other states did, was also risky, especially since after the explosion of 3 thousand tons of ammonium nitrate in the port of Beirut (08/04/2020), which destroyed the elevator, the first aid came from Moscow: at the direction of Putin 5 transport aircraft from Russia brought wheat to Lebanon.

Until now, it has been argued that the deep economic crisis in which Lebanon finds itself is the work of its corrupt authorities. According to the World Bank, Lebanon is facing its worst financial crisis over the 150 years.² Today it is clear that the crisis was provoked from outside. As the independent US news site *The Grayzone* noted, "Washington has suffocated Lebanon and its neighbors with an aggressive economic war, clearly designed to paralyze the country and weaken the Shiite organization Hezbollah, one of the most active resistance forces in the region, which has successfully resisted US and Israel plans, helped Syria fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda, drove out the Israeli

army after two decades of brutal military occupation of southern Lebanon.³

It is known that the United States forced the country's leadership to refuse the help of rich Arab countries, as well as Lebanese emigration, to protect Lebanon from the ongoing Israeli attacks in the border area.⁴

The crisis in Lebanon is the result of a US strategy to crush the so-called "axis of resistance" where Hezbollah is a key player. In 2017, it prevented Jabhat al-Nusra militants from entering Lebanese territory. Thus, it defended the sovereignty of Lebanon in cooperation with Christian, Sunni and Druze militias, as well as with the Lebanese National Army.

In addition to Hezbollah, Syria and all those who prevent Washington from using the region and its subsoil for their own purposes are in the "axis of resistance". The most powerful sanctions imposed by the United States against Iran and Syria rebounded on the Lebanese economy, and military operations in Syria provoked an unprecedented outflow of refugees, some of whom took refuge in neighboring Lebanon and Jordan. According to unofficial data, the number of refugees in Lebanon amounted to more than 2 million people, with a population of 8 million. Naturally, Lebanon is not able to provide livelihoods or employ such a number of refugees. At the same time, assistance to refugees from specialized UN organizations is minimal. Those who managed to obtain refugee status from the UN can count on only \$13 per month.⁵

The practice of confiscation of savings abroad also played an important role. This practice is based on the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA, 10/28/1977), "which allows the President of the United States to issue special executive orders in the area of the economy in response to possible threats to America's national security".⁶ Today, such measures are especially actively used against Iran and foreign organizations affiliated with it, which include, for example, the Lebanese Hezbollah, which acts on the side of the government of

Bashar al-Assad in Syria. In Iran itself, the British authorities blocked the assets of the Mellat bank, saying that the bank was involved in financing Iran's nuclear program. Thus, the applied sanctions can be considered as an "instrument of political pressure".⁷ In 2018, the US Treasury, as well as 5 Arab states, imposed sanctions against the leaders of the Hezbollah movement, which was included in the list of terrorist organizations.⁸ That same year, the US Treasury accused the Central Bank of Iran and Al-Bilad Islamic Bank of financing Hezbollah and imposed sanctions against them.⁹ In addition, the United States imposed sanctions on wealthy Lebanese living outside the country, who, for fear of being accused of supporting terrorism, were forced to refuse to help their homeland. These actions deprived Lebanon of several billion dollars in cash that members of Lebanese families abroad sent home to their relatives. It should be noted that the Lebanese diaspora numbers more than 12 million people, which is significantly more than the population of the country.

Thus, US sanctions against Lebanon prevented the diaspora, as well as the Gulf states, from helping to restore the Lebanese economy. Let me also remind you that the damage from the recent tragedy in the port of Beirut (08/04/2023) was estimated at 10-15 billion dollars. The explosion turned out to be the sixth (among non-nuclear) in terms of power in the history of mankind.¹⁰ One of the consequences of the explosion was a new powerful emigration from the country.

Measures to weaken Lebanon can also include control over the Lebanese army, which the United States prohibits from receiving weapons from Iran or Russia. With great fanfare, the Lebanese Air Force was presented US Cessna aircraft, which "in California are used to pollinate the fields."

It is known that Lebanon in the UN votes for anti-Russian resolutions. However, there is no consensus in the country about SMO. And this is not surprising. It should be noted the role of the Association of Graduates of Russian and Soviet Universities,

which took a pro-Russian position. In the current situation, it is very important that graduates (and there are 18,000 of them) have created several websites that publish materials about Russia, including those about the SMO. The most significant materials from the Russian media are published in translation into Arabic. On one of the Lebanese radio stations there appeared a program called "What They Don't Tell You About" (لك يقولون لا ما). This program included original materials about the SMO, Ukraine, and even about American biological laboratories scattered around the world. In addition, there were organized several mass meetings, rallies in support of Russia, and on May 9, a demonstration was held in Beirut in honor of the Victory Day.

At the end of May, in Lebanon, at the initiative of the Association of Graduates, the Pravda media platform (<http://www.Pravdatv.org>), which publishes information in Arabic, English and Russian began its work.

In addition, on the initiative of Lebanese graduates, from December 1 to December 5, 2022, the XI meeting of the Union of Arab Associations of Graduates of Russian and Soviet Universities was held. More than 200 professionals with Russian diplomas gathered in Beirut. Among the issues discussed at this meeting was the question of countering Russophobia.

In general, it should be noted that the majority of Lebanese sympathize with Russia. This sympathy has deep historical roots.

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Neighboring Syria is also backing Russia, which has helped Damascus liberate much of the country from militants. The SAR President Bashar al-Assad called Vladimir Putin the day after the start of the military operation and expressed strong support for Russia.

Even before the start of the military operation, there were statements that Damascus would recognize the DPR and LPR as sovereign independent states. The position of Damascus was

confirmed by the statement of the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the SAR, Bashar al-Ja'fari: "Syria supports the position of Russia and its legitimate right to defend their national security against aggressive Western policies.

After the start of the SMO, Damascus was concerned about the consequences that could arise from the development of events. The Syrian Council of Ministers held a mini-session to discuss the consequences of the military operation for the Arab Republic. Naturally, the Syrians feared that Russia would withdraw its troops. However, this did not happen.

The reduction of the Russian military contingent in Syria and the transfer of some units to the Ukrainian front only slightly affected the tactical capabilities of the Syrian troops opposing the militants. In addition, since most of the country has been liberated, there has been a general decrease in the intensity of hostilities on the Syrian front, although airstrikes on Syrian territory continue.

The Syrian government pays great attention to the return of its citizens who have taken refuge in neighboring countries. Damascus has repeatedly declared amnesty for those who fought on the side of the opposition. According to a joint statement by the interdepartmental coordination headquarters of Russia and Syria, as of early May 2023, 2,435,508 Syrians returned to the country.¹³ The return of Syrian refugees to their homeland is one of the key issues on the domestic political agenda.

The US sanctions have hurt the Syrian economy by restricting cash flows, equipment, and curtailing exports. The presence of the United States in northeast Syria and its control over oil and gas production deprives Damascus of important income: all pre-war oil production in Syria was 380 thousand barrels per day, or about 18.5 million tons. Without taking into account the cost at \$60–70 per barrel, this makes \$1.1–1.2 billion.¹⁴

The weakening of the financial base affected the country's economy. The price of bread has doubled, the price of gasoline has nearly tripled. Climatic and environmental disasters have

been added to the deterioration of socio-economic conditions. In the summer of 2021, Syria, already vulnerable to water supplies, experienced its worst drought in 70 years. Foreign NGOs sounded the alarm, as they were convinced that more than 5 million people in Syria are on the verge of starvation.¹⁵ As a result of the drought (as well as Turkish misconduct in the upper reaches of the river), the water level in the Euphrates River has decreased, which has negatively affected energy generation. Agricultural lands have not received proper irrigation. Before the invasion of ISIS militants (a terrorist organization banned in Russia) into Syria, the country annually produced up to 4 million tons of wheat, in 2018 only 1.8. Under these conditions, the constant supply of humanitarian aid from Russia, including after the devastating earthquake, has become an important factor in food security. In addition, the drought caused new displacements of the population, forced to leave their dry lands and move to less affected territories.¹⁶

These climatic disasters, as well as the long war with ISIS, have deprived the country not only of vital energy sources, but also of rich agricultural resources. In the Jazira region, animal husbandry has practically disappeared, cotton fields have come under Turkish control, grain fields have been burned and need to be rehabilitated. Before the war, agriculture and oil production together gave the country about half of its GDP.

The country's leadership is particularly concerned about the presence of the US military (900 people) in the northeast of the country. The US authorities in the Raqqa region began to create a "Free Syrian Army", which includes the leftovers from ISIS¹⁷. The goal of the "army" is not only to destabilize the situation in this country, but also to force Russia to fight on two fronts. It is obvious that the liberation of this region will also require great efforts by the international community, since here, in addition to the United States, the interests of Turkey and Kurdish armed groups are still tied up.

Syria is also interested in our victory because it needs to receive international support in the issue of returning the territories occupied by Turkey in Idlib in the north-west of the country.

The most difficult is the return of Idlib. The fact is that during the hostilities, the militants who lost but were spared and their families (including the Uighurs)¹⁸ were brought there. Thus, a multinational colony has gathered here, hostile to the legitimate authority in Syria. In addition, this region, with its four million inhabitants living in dire sanitary conditions, has shown high incidence rates during the COVID pandemic. Families of the militants and the remaining locals are in difficult conditions, although the ceasefire established in March 2020 is maintained despite fairly frequent violations.

Naturally, civilians suffer the most from these skirmishes. The local population is in a state of information vacuum, and since possible information comes only from the leaders of the militants, the political situation outside of Idlib is interpreted from the point of view of anti-Syrian and anti-Russian positions.

It is not surprising that in Idlib they condemn the Russian operation, drawing graffiti on the walls of houses in support of Kyiv. Even before the start of the Russian military operation, the Syrian-Ukrainian businessman Tariq al-Jasim announced the recruitment of volunteers for his detachment, which suggested the participation of foreign mercenaries in the Donbass on the side of Kiev. Today, his detachment, consisting mainly of Syrian opposition fighters, is stationed in Odessa, where he simultaneously oversees the drug trade.

As for the return of the territory of Idlib to Syria, we must remember how in the 1930s Turkey (with the help of France) took over the territory of Alexandretta / Iskanderun, arranging a fictitious census and a pseudo referendum, as a result of which this territory (now Hatay) became part of Turkey. It looks like Ankara may use a similar scenario.

The territory of Idlib is 6,097 km², which is twice the territory of the state of Luxembourg (2,586 km²). A strategic highway passes through Idlib, linking Latakia, Syria's main seaport, with Aleppo, the country's economic capital. There are settlements with Sunni, Alawite, Christian and even Druze populations. The Idlib problem was discussed in September 2021 at a meeting between the presidents of Russia and Syria. Without naming Turkey directly, the Russian president acknowledged the obstacle posed by Turkish forces in the Syrian project to liberate Idlib: "The main problem, in my opinion," said V.V. Putin, is that foreign armed forces remain in certain areas of the country without the approval of the United Nations and without your permission".¹⁹

It should be noted the impact of the strengthening of relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia on the general situation in the region and, above all, on the attitude of the Arabian states towards Syria, which once had a negative attitude towards Damascus. The return of Syria to the League of Arab States means not only the strengthening of the Arab ranks, but also the indispensable return of the still occupied Syrian territories. This will undoubtedly be followed by the participation of rich Arab countries in the restoration of the Syrian economy, which in turn will affect both the growth of their prestige and the improvement of the socio-economic situation in the entire Arab East.

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Changes in the political climate in the Middle East are perceived somewhat differently in the Kingdom of Jordan. 2023 pleased the Jordanian people with the marriages of members of the royal house: first, the eldest daughter of King Abdullah II of Jordan and Queen Rania, 26-year-old Princess Iman, married a businessman of Greek origin Jamil Alexander Termiotis, after which the engagement of the Crown Prince of Jordan Al-Hussein

was announced with Saudi Arabian citizen Rajwa Khaled bin Musaed bin Saif bin Abdulaziz al-Saif. However, there was a scandal within the ruling family 2 years ago, or rather an attempt to overthrow the ruling king Abdullah II and replace him with a half-brother.²⁰

It was alleged that Prince Hamzeh²¹, who claimed the throne, managed to rally opposition forces in the kingdom, including the leaders of some Arab tribes, as well as high-ranking officers in the security services. The root cause of what happened was the late King Hussein's refusal of the ladder / seigneurial right of succession, according to which power is transferred from the elder brother to the next brother in age. Thus, Jordan, following Saudi Arabia, switched to the traditional / majority inheritance system adopted in most countries of the world, which was facilitated by intrigues within the family on the eve of the death of King Hussein.²² The plot involved Ibrahim Awadallah, a high-ranking dual-citizen official who was also an economic adviser to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

What explains the role of Saudi Arabia in the conspiracy? The fact is that the Saudi dynasty is suspected of wanting to take away from Jordan the status of the guardian of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The monarchs of Jordan since 1924 (they are the closest descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) have been officially recognized as the guardians of the Temple Mount, known to Moslems as Haram al-Sharif or the Noble Sanctuary.²³ This is the third shrine among Moslems and the title of its custodian is highly revered. In turn, the king of Saudi Arabia - (Harith al-Haramain) is the keeper of two shrines (Mecca and Medina). Considering the ambitions of Riyadh, which wants to become the leader of the Arab-Moslem world, King Abdullah is afraid of losing his status. Moreover, 60 per cent of the population of Jordan are Palestinians, most of whom do not have the political rights of an indigenous inhabitant of the country, and claim Jordanian territory.

Another problem is refugees from Syria and Iraq. The number of them in Jordan is not exactly known. According to the

UN HCR, there are approximately more than 1.5 million of them in the country (out of a total population of 7 million). Naturally, for Jordan, with its underdeveloped economy, the maintenance of such a number of refugees without the help of the UN is an impossible task. As *Gazeta Ru* noted: "The maintenance of refugees cost the country up to \$1 billion a year, while Jordan itself suffered from financial and environmental problems."²⁴ The problem of water has become especially acute, because Jordan is among the ten countries most experiencing water shortages. The camps built by the Jordanian authorities to accommodate refugees have practically turned into cities with their own structure. Thus, the Zaatari camp, designed for 60 thousand refugees, accommodated 150 thousand people, becoming the 4th settlement in Jordan in terms of the number of people living in it.

The Jordanian authorities are also concerned that the refugee camps have become breeding grounds for drugs and suppliers of militants to ISIS and its affiliated gangs. This circumstance suggests that radical sentiments persist among the refugees living in the camps.

The current changes in the Middle East in particular the proposed reduction of the role of the United States, are fraught with trouble for Jordan. Since the United States is Jordan's main financial donor. With the predicted reduction of the American presence in the Middle East, King Abdullah is afraid of losing the confidence of his main sponsor – the United States – if he leaves the region. This explains the fact that after Biden took office, the first person to visit Washington was the Jordanian king. The fact is that the United States is the kingdom's main donor in the military-technical and financial spheres. From 1946 to 2018, Jordan received \$22 billion in financial assistance from the United States. Since 2015, the kingdom has received \$1.5 billion worth of military equipment and weapons from the United States.²⁵

In addition to the United States, Arabian monarchies also gave money to the economy of Jordan. But Amman's relations with them are not the best either way. The tribes inhabiting Jordan are mostly

of Saudi origin, and still orient themselves towards Riyadh. It should be noted that what is happening on the territory of Ukraine was originally described in the Jordanian press from a pro-American point of view. However, after some time, information appeared from Syria and Lebanon. Jordanian intelligentsia, politicians, public figures and journalists signed a collective petition condemning the media that broadcast materials calling for violence against Russian military personnel and negatively interpreting Russia's position. They called for impartial transmission of information, taking into account the positions of all parties involved in the Ukrainian crisis. In the appeal, the signatories noted that the Jordanian society was divided in opinions about the crisis in Ukraine, however, they were unanimous in their opinion that the media were politicized and biased.

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In general, it should be noted that the enlightened people of the "Arab street" support Russia. Of course, there are those who do not seek to understand the situation, or live in isolation from the changes taking place in the Middle East. However, it is very important that in the upper echelons of power there is a growing understanding of the role of the United States in unleashing the conflict in Ukraine, as well as in the destructive nature of American policy in the Arab world. And this affects the reassessment of the situation in the Middle East, strengthens hopes for an increase in the role of Arab countries in the international agenda. Subsequent events showed that the countries of the League of Arab States perceive the events in Ukraine as one of the next US measures on the path to establishing a unipolar world. The proof of this was the return to the Arab League of Syria, whose membership was suspended during the period of hostilities. It can be stated that the reaction of the Arab countries to the Ukrainian crisis reflects respect for the growing potential of Russian foreign policy.

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KANYBEK KUDAYAROV. ANALYTICAL CENTRES OF THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA*

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