



# Settlement of the Syrian Conflict: Prospects for National Dialogue and International Cooperation. Rationale behind Russian Policies

The transcript of the Trialogue Club International Meeting with

**Prof. Vitaly V. Naumkin**

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**Prof. Vitaly V. Naumkin** is President of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

**RUSSE:** Prof. Naumkin is not only an academic and a key Russian expert on the Middle East, but he has also a deep practical insight into Russian interests in the region. This particular experience makes his presentation at once unique and very valuable. At this point I would like to thank Prof. Naumkin for his availability and his readiness to speak with us... [...] to choose Trialogue, and for this, I would like to thank him very much. A big thank you goes to Trialogue Club International, particularly to General Buzhinskiy and Albert Zulkharneev for the idea to make the Swiss Embassy the venue for this special meeting. And last, but not least, I would like to thank you all for taking your time, for your interest, and particularly for your friendship.

**NAUMKIN:** Good morning. First, allow me to express my gratitude to the leadership of Trialogue Club International, to the Embassy of Switzerland, and to the distinguished participants of this discussion meeting. Second, I will focus on the main recent developments in the Syrian crisis and around this crisis, without going too much into details on history of the conflict.

I believe that during the last months, we have been witnessing very serious changes inside Syria and around Syria. So, I will start with some truth inventory of the main developments that can help us to understand what is going on. The first issue that I would like to stress is that we are still witnessing a multilevel conflict in Syria. We have mainly three levels of conflictual relationships.

The first one is local. We have the Government of Syria and the front of loyalists which is a very big segment of the Syrian society supporting the current government. So, I do not know

exactly how large is this segment, but the important thing is that there is such a big segment that believe that the current government is the best choice for Syria and much better than if some rebel or armed opposition groups comes to power. So, regardless of what is happening, this segment deserves to be –especially given the military successes of the Syrian army- more important in the nearest future. On the other hand, we have the Syrian opposition which is now more fragmented than before. The most radical groups, the terrorist groups, which suffered defeat because of the -not joint, but probably parallel- actions by the US led group of states against DAESH or ISIS and the Syrian army with the support of Russia and Iran. The ISIS has been defeated completely. The territory is not anymore the capital of Islamic State, but at the same time there are a lot of “pockets” of ISIS inside Syria in different places. Actually, in the Eastern part of the country and also in the Northwestern part of the country. If ISIS was more or less territorially and even militarily defeated, though we have a lot of sleeping cells, we have a lot of people disappearing somewhere. Even in Afghanistan, which is pretty far from Syria and has no common borders, in accordance with Russian intelligence information there are about four thousand former ISIS fighters in Afghanistan -in the borders of the CIS- and Russia is considering it as a permanent threat to its security and to the security of its allies in Central Asia. I cannot imagine how these ISIS fighters went to Afghanistan and managed to create some military presence. The problem is that Russia has such information and it means that ISIS cells are spread as franchises all over the world even in South East Asia. The second organization which has been considered by the UN Security Council as a terrorist one is Al-Nusra, there has been little possibilities in defeating this group and still preserving its high military potential in the territory of Syria and that is the problem how it is going to be dealt with by the main actors. We are not talking about the moderate groups, but it is clear that we are trying to make definitions between these several armed groups that have a very similar approach towards the conflict in Syria and the future of Syria. This army of warriors is a problem which sooner or later should be solved. I do not know maybe in a manner of some peaceful talks or reconciliation or further deconflicting in the de-escalation zones or Russian-western cooperation, if it still can be revived and preserved. There are a lot of people in the Syrian establishment that believe that the next destination of the Syrian army should be the province of Idlib. I do not share this view. I think it is extremely dangerous and it is a real problem. In my view, this should be solved through dialogue or probably some peaceful talks. This is the local level of the conflict and it still remains.

The second level, which is regional of course, we have also a very tense conflictual relationship between the main regional players. First of all, Iran and the Gulf States. Iran and Saudi Arabia especially. I believe that without some sort of *rapprochement* between Iran and Saudi Arabia nothing can be done. We cannot solve this conflict without some sort of agreement. Not reconciliation which is difficult, but at least some sort of understanding between the Saudis and the Iranians. As you know, Iran is regarded by many players in the region as the main threat, especially by the Gulf States. We have an extremely anti-Iranian position now from a part of the American administration. People like Mr. Bolton and Mr. Pompeo and some others with extremely anti-Iranian motivated players. We have Israel, which is also obsessed with the Iranian threat. That is the second level of the conflict. I think that many of my friends in the West understand that something should be done in order not to exacerbate the tensions in the region. Nobody wants any war between Iran and Israel in the Middle East because we all will lose if it happens. It would be a disaster for many states.

The third level is global actors, especially Russia and the conflictual relationship with the United States. At the same time, even with these recent developments, I can say that we have some successes. We are still cooperating with the United States, under the Troika #2 or the Amman format between Jordan, Russia and the United States that helped to avoid further exacerbation of tensions in the South Eastern zone of Syria. We have more or less some sort of real success in the cessation of hostilities and, hopefully, it will continue regardless other things in the Russian-American bilateral relations. On the other hand, we have been also very closely cooperating with the United States in fighting terrorist groups especially ISIS. There is still some sort of coordination. Raqqa has been liberated by the forces supported by the United States, mainly the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The bulk of these forces are the Kurdish fighters mainly the YPG (People's Protection Units) which is loyal to the Party of the Democratic Union (PYD). As you know, the Kurdish factor is also one of the recent developments. One of the points that I would like to mention is the growing importance of the Kurdish factor. There a lot of disagreements about the Kurds. Our Turkish friends are so tough on the Kurdish issue that all our attempts to convince them, to make some concessions on this issue and to open some channels of communication with the YPG and try to find peaceful solutions to some dialogue with them, and not to considering them all as terrorist, which Turkey is still doing, but this is all absolutely hopeless. The Turks are sure that the Kurdish are even worse than ISIS, and that the YPG are criminals that should be fought to eliminated. As you know there is also a source tension between Turkey and some other members of NATO, especially with the United States because they rely on the Kurds and even promised them to accolade their quest for independence, which is not constructive in our view. There are some similarities in Russian and United States attitudes towards the Syrian Kurds and the source of disagreement between Russia and Turkey. There is also a big disagreement which became clear during the last developments between Russia and Turkey towards the Syrian government. We can say that these manipulations of the Kurdish issue are not very constructive because the Kurds many times have been cheated by promises. They always suffered the results of being involved in the fighting. What is happening in Raqqa is a disaster. We can see that 70% of the city has been totally destroyed and our American colleagues let this city destroyed. There were a lot of casualties. There was no transparency in showing to the world what had happened in Raqqa. So this clearly is a sign of double standards. While Americans are speaking about Russia has been doing really badly in Eastern Ghouta, there is no comparison and we see a big difference. I am not going to praise Russia everywhere, especially in this audience, but when I compare what happened here, Raqqa is the worst case. A lot of people have been killed. Nobody knows how many, nobody knows anything. The people are trying to come back to the city and everything have been destroyed. There are a lot of mines everywhere. There is no demining. We are making demining, we are providing humanitarian aid to many people in Syria. Also the international community and the mass media is not paying much attention. The growing importance of the reconstruction in Syria is one of the problems. The fact is that those states who are capable to provide help to the population they do not want to do it in the areas controlled by the Syrian Government. Of course Russia cannot reconstruct Syria, we do not have such resources. The cost of the total reconstruction is no less than 400 billion dollars, but something should be done; not to help Bashar Al-Assad, but in order to help the Syrian people. Civil war is always a brutal and disgusting thing, there are no winners or losers. The main loser in this case is the Syrian population. Something should be done. As I said, unfortunately, a lot about our colleagues and friends in the Middle East and in the West are not going to do it. I think the United

Nations can do something, some European states. Switzerland is always very generous and can provide some help. The problem is what would be next in the future of Syria? One of the points that I would like to mention is that practically speaking there are zones of influence that several states –regional and local- are trying to put under the rule of some opposition groups loyal to these states. The United States is working in this direction, our friends in Turkey are also helping out their forces in the territory of Syria, which is tolerated by Russia because of the necessity to work together with Turkey. The Syrian Government criticize Turkey as much as they criticize those who are fighting against them.

The issue of chemical weapons is also a very complicated issue now. My personal opinion is that there is no clear evidence of any sort of use of chemical weapons. There are competing versions of what has happened starting by accusing the Syrian army for using chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta. There is another version the Russian version that there was no chemical attack and there was a theater played by the opposition groups in order to accuse the Syrian army; and the third version is that it was used by the opposition groups themselves as a provocation. The current situation is rather tense and we cannot agree on anything especially with our American colleagues, which is harmful for the peace process.

The peace process in Geneva has some problems and there are some points that I would like to mention. Its main goal now is to create a constitutional commission, which was agreed in the Sochi Congress of the Syrian forces. Also it was a big concession based on the agreement made by Mr. Lavrov and Mr. Guterres based on the idea that the establishment of the constitutional commission will be further rewriting on the Syrian Constitution and then fair elections under international supervision. This agreement was not supported by the Syrian government. They believe that the constitutional commission should be created by the Syrians themselves and should be only in Damascus and not in Geneva. The main count for the constitutional commission, which was also mostly agreed on by the main players, including Russia, it should consist in three parts: one third belongs to the Syrian Government; one third to the opposition, and one third appointed by the UN special envoy. This is also not welcomed by our Syrian friends in Damascus, they would like to have a clear majority of the members of this constitutional commission, probably 150 people, which is of course not shared by the Syrian opposition.

The next issue is the total disarray of the Syrian opposition. I personally would like to see one consolidated opposition with a clear group of people that have a consolidated mandate to represent the different groups and to start talks with the government. Of course, we need more concessions from the government as well, but given the current hostilities and the exacerbation of tensions it seems difficult. Though Russia is still continue its efforts working with the Syrian Government and pushing it to the direction of an open participation and talks.

There are also some positive developments. One of these positive developments is that there are less hostilities on the ground with the exception of Eastern Ghouta. All zones of de-escalation are working well. There are less killings and less atrocities in Syria. But the big question is what to do later with these places. We have now three formats of negotiations. The first one is Geneva, which is fully supported by everyone including Russia. We all approved the UN Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) and its mandate should be discussed in Geneva. The second format is Astana where the meetings will be continued.

Though there are some disagreements, but still is working well. There are some new developments in the realm of security and military issues discussed in Astana. The third is the Sochi Congress, the question is whether this Congress is a one-time event or it would be another congress, but is not clear. In principle, Russia has made it clear that it has no intention to turn it into a competitive venue of Geneva or even Astana. So it was regarded as a complementary event supporting Geneva but at the same time, if necessary we cannot exclude another meeting of this type.

In general, I can say the situation is not very encouraging. The prospects of peace are not very clear. We do not have much optimism about a quick solution of this crisis, but still there are a lot of positive moves. I think there is a general understanding that the situation cannot be solved by military ways and everybody is in favor of diplomatic solutions. There is still hope that we can work together. Thank you for your attention.

## Q&A

**Comment of Dr. Vladimir A. Orlov**, Trialogue Club International Founder, PIR Center Special Advisor

Good morning. I took this microphone for substantive comment and question for our speaker, but I cannot start without thanking Professor Naumkin for his very bright presentation and the Swiss Embassy and particularly my dear friend Yve Rossier who is not here. Thank you so much for your hospitality in this small part of Switzerland in the center of Moscow. The observation I wanted to make relates to weapons of mass destruction but not chemical weapons although they are in the minds of all of us. I am talking about nuclear weapons and, actually, this brings me to the first part of Prof. Naumkin's speech when he has covered only the regional situation and Syria is an important piece, but of course we have the whole Middle East.

We have currently two political landmines are in the region at minimum two which are ready to explode Weapons of Mass Destruction are concerned. And I use landmines not in the literal sense but Weapons of Mass Destruction in direct sense.

The first landmine here is what will happen to the JCPOA with the Iran deal. I fully agree with the assessment of Naumkin here. I would like to emphasize that there are some miscalculations in certain capitals, particularly in Europe, that if United States, and that's a question of weeks, takes a decision to withdraw from the agreement then nothing will happen. European money will continue flowing to Iran, Iran will be almost as counting as it was before and so on in a circle, so it will be not strict but not something damaging global or regional security.

From what we understand from Teheran and from what we heard from recent meetings of Russian experts with our Iranian colleagues, with Mr Zarif, with Mr. Velayati just a few days ago, we understand that not for propaganda purposes, not for political pressure purposes, but for planning purposes Iranian colleagues are prepared for very serious counter steps in case US finally decides to unilaterally withdraw from that multilateral agreement. It is definitely

key interest of my country, Russia, if again we will see some new formal in a different place completely not transparent when something goes on the highly from the high of IAEA. I would say that if the US makes that completely damaging step then a chain of events unfortunately makes unfold. I do want to flag it here for the regional situation.

The second political landmine is maybe more long-term thing and maybe not has that immediate damaging implications so far, but if also may echo very badly for the region and for the globe. This is plug of any effort, failure of mestablishment of zone free of Weapons of Mass Destruction at Middle East nor any initial step towards the implementation of the decision of the 1995 NPT conference on such a zone nor any further decisions. In 2012 no conference was held although it was prepared on the discussion on the zone. In 2015 three nations, US, UK and Canada, blocked the consensus at the NPT Review conference in New York. As a result, we don't have a final document and definitely no progress on the Middle East zone issue since that.

Tomorrow I go to Geneva for the next prepcom of the NPT review process which will start next week. Whether it will be overtly of the Agenda or covertly we clearly see that things are going in a very dangerous way and the interconnection of nuclear non-proliferation in such a sensitive region, in the Middle East, is completely ignored and the demands of the members of the NPT from the Middle East multi-year demands for the dialogue and final establishment of such a zone actually nuclear weapons proposal, chemical, biological it just completely blocked. My hope is that in addition to better dialogue and communication of week depository states, Russia, the UK and US on this issue, UN Secretary General who is another core-convener of that potential conference, Mr. Gutierrez will say his word. So far, however, we didn't see a clear indication from the UN Secretary General on that particular matter. And you learn the engagement in another very complex, difficult and potentially poisonous issue.

My question to the speaker relates to the initial point on the need in the region to find some rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. We know it is important, we know how difficult even to imagine some progress because so far in my view nothing has happened, quite the opposite. Probably in Vienna the confrontation has been higher than ever with Iran showing a very strong resilience and a lot of success.

**QUESTION:** *Can Russia contribute to that dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia or this is purely an issue of the two and my country can do nothing?*

**NAUMKIN:** Russian diplomacy is skillful and they are always trying to mediate in many conflicts. For instance, the Syrian Government and the Kurds. The same about the Syrian Government and the opposition, together with our UN friends and some other countries. The second thing is about the states in the region including Iran and Saudi Arabia. I do not think we can do much in that. Even if we are seeing some new conflictual cases in the region, which still complicate the already existing tensions, like for instance the Qatari crisis. By the way, Russia has been always managing to support to have good relationship with different conflictual partners like Qatar and Saudi Arabia; Israel and the Palestinians; Iran, so on and so forth. We have good relationships with almost everyone, but I do not think we can do a lot in trying to reconcile Iran and Saudi Arabia.

On the contrary, given your remark on this possibility of United States quitting from the JCPOA, we can imagine several scenarios. One of the scenarios is that if the United States quits from the agreement and the other members of the international community goes without the United States, it can be imagined and managed to convince our Iranian friends not to overreact. It would be a good scenario. The worst case scenario is the real overreaction by the Iranians. By overreaction, I mean if the Iranians decide to quit the NPT and not only from the military nuclear program. This program cannot be tolerated by the Israelis and the possibility of a big war with Teheran can become a reality. There are some options, some scenarios between these two. So, in this case, I think the chances for reconciliation are very small, but nobody wants big wars in the region. I think they can come to some sort of agreement on the regional issues, especially war in Yemen or probably some other places in the Middle East where there are other conflicts.

**QUESTION:** *Could you elaborate on the economic impacts of the Syrian conflict and what is at stake?*

**NAUMKIN:** From the very beginning the economics was at the center of this conflict. It bring into the root causes of this conflict, I can remember what Brzezinski was saying in 2011, when he said that one of the reasons of the conflict in Syria was a severe drought from 2006 to 2011, when thousands of peasants went to the cities and start demanding for improving living conditions. As of now, we see that a substantial part of the Syrian economy has been destroyed, but amazingly Bashar Al-Assad's Government is doing well in preserving the situation. Do not get me wrong, there is a lot of people that are in need of humanitarian aid and solve humanitarian situation. (The same we can see in Yemen, though the international community is not paying much attention to what is going on there. The current situation is much worse in Yemen, about one million people suffering from cholera). Even if the Syrian Government is managing the economic situation, as I mentioned, the main issue is how to reconstruct this economy. We know that those possible sponsors of this aid are in the Gulf, the European Union, the United States, probably China, they are not well-prepared to do that under the current state. Everyone understand this. By the way, the Syrian diaspora in the world is extremely wealthy. For instance, there are a lot of billionaires in the world that have a Syrian origin, but they are not too persuaded to invest their money under the present circumstances, but I cannot exclude some concert of nations that will be willing to reconstruct Syria, if a political solution or a political process starts, but it would be difficult. I do not think that we should consider Syria as a failed state, but it is on the brink to become such and it would be a spillover effect on the neighboring states. Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq which they have also living a difficult position now. That is why I think we need some cooperation in the international community. The minimum thing could help the Syrian people, especially the issue of refugees.

**QUESTION:** *As an academician, what would be your take on the basic parameters of a future constitution of Syria?*

**NAUMKIN:** There are several attempts to help Syrians as part of this constitutional process. As they said, these attempts faced a lot of problems. There are several visions shared by many players inside of Syria. Some of our colleagues and friends in the Government believe that the existing constitution of Syria, of 2012, is a perfect one and it should not be replaced by a

new one, but there might be some amendments. By the way, this constitution is not bad at all, but it has to be implemented. That is the question. Of course is better, in the view of many international experts that, if there is a new constitution provided by this constitutional commission, all the Syrians compiled from representatives of different groups, both the government and the opposition, also some international experts. The main issue of the future of Syrian State is very clear. If you look at the “twelve points non-paper” by the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, you can find everything there. There are several hard questions, but in general the vision is a common thought for many international players. There are main two points which are regarded differently by many groups in Syria. One is the view of Syria as a secular state or not. There are supporters of the Islamic State based on the Sharia law and there are strong supporters of a secular state. Though the current Syrian constitution is not saying anything about a secular state. (By the way in the Middle East, if you look all constitutions, there is no constitution saying that a state is secular with the exception of one state: Turkey. Formally, Turkey is the only secular state in the Middle East which is not so in practice). If you look at the document of Staffan de Mistura, made by his team, I was part of this team, there are some formulas. One of them is not a secular state, making acceptable for many groups, but defending the rights of minorities; and a state based on citizenship. It means that it is almost equal to a secular state, but without irritating the people who are in favor of Islamic or more religious rights in the state. We should let the Syrians decide it, because it is not our job to decide things instead of Syrians, but still speaking on the issue of a secularism, keeping a tough manner is not helping to find a common ground between competing opinions. The second question is about centralization or decentralization. The Kurds are in favor of at least total administrative or even political autonomy of their region in the north. There are a lot of other groups who are asking for this: a decentralized system. As you know, Syria is a unitary state highly centralized. A lot of people, not only in government, but some opposition groups are in favor of the Arab character of the state, Arabic as the distinctive feature of the state. But when you are speaking to the Kurds, they say we are not willing to live in our state. We are loyal to Syria, we are part of Syrian society. Let it be as Syrian Republic, instead of Syrian Arab Republic, because we are Syrian Kurds. We are not Arabs. We would even be willing to serve in the Syrian army, but let it be not Syrian Arab army. These two issues are sensitive in terms of writing a constitution, but before start writing the constitution some problems like the main form of the constitutional commission and even the venue where it would work and the role of the global community, especially the United Nations should be decided among the Syrians themselves.

**QUESTION:** *Could you see a constitutional process without President Assad and, if so, could it possibly take this goal without endangering the entire social religious fabric?*

**NAUMKIN:** I think that it is impossible to meet any sort of political process without Assad. There was a general agreement between the main players that he should remain for the period of transition. So, we are not speaking about the future of Syria. Our goal is to create favorable conditions for all Syrians to decide which one could rule, but for the period of implementing these goals or creating favorable conditions for the convening of free elections. It would be very risky when people even to discuss the possible removal of Mr. Assad because it could cause a new wave of civil war in Syria.

**QUESTION:** [First question inaudible] *what from your perspective needs to be done to turn high-level summits into a successfully [inaudible] in Syria and what are your expectations?*

**NAUMKIN:** I will start with your first question about the disregards. Yes, there are disagreements, but I would not exaggerate the impact of these disagreements. On the general cooperation within the field, even though about the Syrian conflict has substantial disagreements and contradictions, we are not exaggerating them including the missile attacks. For me it was logical, but I remember some time ago when I had a meeting with a high-level Turkish official, he told me –“You know, for many years we have been investing and supporting the armed opposition in Syria, so it is impossible just to change the course because of our cooperation with your country”. So there are some obligations towards, for instance, different groups of Turkomans and some other armed groups that have been supported by Turkey. On the contrary there are signs of “Turkeyzation” of the opposition, because most of the groups have been supported by Qatar for instance. The support of Qatar has been degraded because of the Qatar crisis. Saudi Arabia is trying to change its relationship and probably trying to be more responsive to what Russia is being doing in bilateral issues. The Russia and Turkey economic cooperation is so important to both countries that we should not exaggerate these disagreements. There are so many things, especially if Turkey succeed in building more confidence. It would be such an important move for a country that is a NATO member.

About Russia and the United States, if you analyze what Mr. Trump has been saying that there are at least two venues of constructive cooperation between Russia and the United States. One is Syria and the other one is the fight against terrorism. So it is still there. It looks strange to me, the statement about the missile attacks: “I am not aiming for a regime change and I am not against the government of Mr. Assad. It is just a message to Mr. Assad not to use chemical weapons”. It is strange, but still was a very important message to Russia that it is not against the government of Mr. Assad, and that it was only a signal. A signal without loss of lives. It is a strong signal, but at the same time it is not a world war act against Assad. It leaves the door open for cooperation between Russia and the United States. So I hope that these summits would help in the nearest future how to solve disagreements between Russia and the West. It would be helpful to find a solution to the Syrian crisis.

Thank you for your attention.

### **Final remarks**

**BUZHINSKIY:** Just to finish our meeting, as usual, a few words from the military man about the situation in Syria. First of all, about the air strikes. These air strikes, of course, from the military point of view were certainly harmless, even in comparison with last year’s strikes. This time a couple of empty temples, a couple of empty buildings; harmless research center also empty and no casualties. So, it was a political demonstration of course and a signal. There are good things and bad things about these strikes. The good thing is that the deconflicting mechanism and the channels of communication between Russian and US military are working, even in the course of the missile strikes. The bad thing is that yes, this time President Trump listen to the voices supported by Secretary Matthews that the conflict between United States armed forces and Russian armed forces is possible, if Russian

servicemen are hit or Russian objects are hit and that conflict may very fast goes beyond any control. It is impossible, but it is my personal conviction and I repeat it every time and everywhere, that if conflict between the United States and Russia starts, it would lead to nowhere. It would lead to extremely unprecedented consequences. You cannot control the conflict between United States and Russia since, on one hand, Russia cannot afford waging a conventional war for months or years and neither side is ready to accept defeat. So you may imagine what may happen. So, if the strikes continue and I suspect these strikes may continue since, I suspect, that this idea of regime change is again on the table of our western partners. In the sense of Russian military presence in Syria, we are practically on the same level as in the 70's of last century. Several thousands of our military advisors, practically in each battalion, each squadron, each significant military object. There are groups of Russian advisors spread all over Syria, plus Russian policemen, Russian Special Forces, centers for reconciliation, forces staff by Russian military. So it is very easy, even by mistake to hit and shell Russian blood, and this of course retaliation would follow. So, let's hope that our American partners will be wise enough not to continue this policy of military confrontation and I hope that the political settlement is somewhere in the horizon.