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HIGHLIGHTS FROM SESSIONS

Session

The New American – Russian Dynamics in the Middle East: A Condominium or A Contested Sphere?"

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60 minutes

[Session Video](#)[Panelist Profiles](#)[Unedited transcript link](#)

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Moderator:

- Raghida Dergham, Founder and Executive Chairman, Beirut Institute

Panelists:

- Ambassador Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy, Deputy Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Syria, Egypt
- Dr. Elliott Abrams, Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations, USA
- Dr. Andrei Fedorov is the Chairman of the Fund for Political Research and Consulting in Russia
- Vance Serchuk, Executive Director, KKR Global Institute, USA
- Andrey Bystritsky, Chairman, Board of the Foundation for Development and Support, Valdai Discussion Club, Russia
- Prof. Dr. Malik R. Dahlan, Senior Research Fellow, RAND. Professor of International Law and Public Policy, Queen Mary, University of London, Advisory Board Member, Beirut Institute, Saudi Arabia

Dr. Elliott Abrams:

Syria is the obvious place where we see the confrontation but we may see some cooperation. I think the question is "What are Russia's goals here?"

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Russia has different interests from Iran. Russia doesn't need Assad; if the Russian goal is a unified Syria, there can be a successor government without Assad that could try to make peace with the various parts of the country, particularly the Sunni majority, and that will allow Russia to keep those bases. But that doesn't do it for Iran.

Iran has a much larger project of this - to borrow a phrase from King Abdallah of Jordan "the Shia Crescent". Iran wants to have a reach to the Mediterranean, Iran wants to be on the Israeli-Syrian border. I don't think those are Russian goals. So what gives me some hope of a possible solution is separation of Iranian and Russian objectives in Syria, and the Russians have maintained, as we just heard a relationship with Israel, it's a pretty good one. So there is no particular reason to believe that the Russians want to advance the Iranian project in Syria. If they do, there is going to be a lot of fighting in Syria. If they are willing to separate themselves, then one could see a negotiation.

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I came here from Israel and the general view there today is that [Hezbollah's leader] Nasrallah and the Israelis do not want an expansion of that conflict into Lebanon. So, it would be the Israelis and the Iranians in Syria.

I would not say that it is a de facto understanding between the Israelis and Hezbollah, I would say that each is assessing the goals of the other; and each assesses that its own situation would not be advanced if there were another conflict like 2006 now.

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I think [The President] has made it clear from the very beginning that it is possible to work out some arrangements with Putin where American and Russian interests do not necessarily clash. However, American and Iranian interests necessarily clash because Iran is trying to overturn the entire order of the Middle East. Russia has chosen Iran as an ally and a partner in Syria at least, that is going to lead to a confrontation. So the question is partly: will Putin decide that Iran's project in the Middle East is not Russia's project, and pull back? If he does, then it is possible I think to see the American administration and the government of Russia figure out some way to align interests in the Middle East. I think the critical question here it seems to me is the role of Iran and Russia's decision about whether it will align itself with others - it has good relations with some of the Arab countries, with Israel and in a certain way with the United States. It needs to break with Iran for those other relationships to come to fruition.

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First I would say I don't think you will actually see European companies aligning themselves against the United States, this is not primarily what Merkel wants, what May wants, what Macron wants. 25, 50 thousand individual companies have to decide what to do about those sanctions and I think they will not risk being caught. I think there is possibility that these proxy wars, which are being fought, and this is what is happening: Yemen is a proxy war being fought by Iran against Saudi Arabia, Syria is a proxy war being fought by Iran against primarily Israel and to a certain extent other neighbors. Those wars can continue for quite a while, they can expand, I myself doubt that they will, but they can certainly intensify and I think that is one of the huge problems we face.

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The President is I think torn, as we said before, between a desire to reach the outcomes and benefit the United States and the desire not to be dragged further into Middle Eastern wars. He has commented several times that the longest war in the history of the United States is Afghanistan involvement.

I actually think that as the new team takes over now and I certainly hope let me say personally that we move to a policy of peaceful regime change because I think as we look at Syria, as we look at Yemen, as we look at this entire region, in fact many of the problems of the region are the result of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign and military policy and until that changes, these problems cannot dissolve.

Dr. Andrei Fedorov:

In comparison to the previous period of Russian-US relations, now these relations are, turned from reasonable to emotional. We don't have any kind of stable, constant, and effective partnership. This is the problem. We broke down nearly everything and what is going on now is just separate attempts to find something etc.

The problem with Syria is that it's not the priority for the United States. We should realize this. It is just only one of the problems for the United States, there are much more important problems of North Korea, Iran, and Syria is going in the second row. For us, the problem is a traditional one: entrance is one cent, exit is one dollar. The problem for us now is how to leave Syria, not how to develop Syria. This is not the question. The question is how to organize the legal, consequent, and effective exit. An exit which will not lead to the separation of the country, will keep the unity of Syria and will save our face in the Middle East.

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In the current situation when we are trying to find certain solution in Syria, both Turkey and Iran are our partners on the run.

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The problem of Israel - and Netanyahu of course has been in Moscow a number of times during the last years - is only one: they want to be sure that the new Syria will not be a direct danger, which is a very big question because my understanding of the situation is that our friends in Tehran have absolutely another opinion. They would like to control Syria and this is the problem in our relations. We don't bring it to the public too much but this was one of the problems from the last meeting between Putin, Rohani and Erdogan.

The problem is the future because for the whole region, the issue of security of Israel is one of the very important ones, because it is also about Russian-American relations. The security of Israel is not a regional problem, it is a global problem.

What Netanyahu wants and he asked from Putin during their last talks is guarantees. He wants certain political guarantees that the new regime in Syria will not be a direct danger.

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First of all, we have the problem of Iran and Israel's, which is growing...and it is not just a political competition, it is a global type of competition. It is a competition which is both regional, global and is touching all the areas. And the question of future relations between Iran, Syria and Israel is the question of survival, not of dialogue.

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I think the question is only one: whether we can find a kind of model of division of labor between Russia and the United States in this region. It is obvious that even we are improving our relationship with Saudi Arabia, with some other countries. The influence on their policy from the United States is much bigger and much stronger. This is the reality. So our task and it was correctly mentioned here is to find the gaps where Russia might be present, might be present on a long-term basis and not just coming and going. This is the problem. So we need now to have our own long term strategy in the region, which will also be based on certain respect of fewest interest in the region.

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Do not expect the Syrian problem will be solved soon. I think we will need some more years. 2-3 years from my personal point of view.

Don't think that Russia can be once and forever a side for solving Syrian problem. It became obvious within last year that without all parties involved in Syrian conflict, no solution can be found. It is not Sochi, it is not Astana, it is not a solution. A solution will be found only when all the forces will be involved in the peace process.

Don't expect that there will be something positive in Russian-American relations before transitional actions to the Congress in November. I think only after it there is a possibility for real dialogue also on the Middle East.

Ambassador Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy:

In Syria, there is a convergence of interest, and I will very quickly refer you, refer all of you to the Delayney statement issued on the occasion of the meeting between presidents Putin and Trump.

One is de confliction in Syria, I think it has worked, and it continues to work and I think we continue to attach priority to it.

Second, the preservation of territory, unity, territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria. I think both presidents have attached importance to that and to achieve that, they have underlined the importance of the UN-led process.

The third element, which I think is overlooked by many when they refer to an area where both Russia and the United States cooperate is in the South West zone bordering the Golan Heights and Jordan. And there they did say very clearly, that they would like, actually they would work towards reducing and ultimately removing all foreign military presence from that region and I think that is a very important thing and could not only have implications for this particular zone but other places in Europe, sorry other places in Syria; so yes there are common interests and I believe it is possible for both Washington and Moscow to work out an arrangement within the context of a UN-sponsored...

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The decision by the US administration on the JCPOA is a very important one, and interestingly enough we have not yet seen the full extent of Iranian reaction regionally or otherwise.

Clearly Syria is an arena for possible escalation.

I think any escalation in the area will allow further, I would say reluctance to engage in a political process and there can be no serious political process without the Syrian government being involved directly and constructively.

I think what is critical at this point is to get the Americans and Russians seriously engaged on building on the commonalities.

Part of the understanding is that there is a fear, a concern, that foreign forces inside Syria can disrupt regional stability.

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Syria is a test of the viability of the nation-state in the Middle East.

Now here is, I would think, a difference between the Iranian position and the Russian position: Russia wants to preserve Syria as a nation-state, of course what form it takes is subject to discussion; Iran is taking more the line - and the way it operates - of non-state actors.

We need to have a nation-state in Syria with a strong central government but also with a different arrangement with the various regions. I think this is what we are facing today, and we need to work in that direction. There are those who may not want that, but I think this is the fundamental difference I think between Russia and Iran and I think it can be resolved if we have an agreement between the United States and Russia and I think that is possible.

Vance Serchuk:

The essence of US national security strategy across multiple administrations is we don't want to see spheres of influence in Eurasia; the essence of Russia's national security strategy is to try to create a sphere of influence for itself. The essence of US values-based approach is we believe that people should be able to pursue governments of their own choosing.

Russia stands for something else. So that does not mean that we are bound for conflict; it does mean that there is an intrinsic tension in the relationship and that we are going to be competing with each other, and that is playing out most dramatically in Syria and across the Middle East today. But it is not the result of misunderstanding; I think it is the result of just a fundamental tension in how we pursue our interests and our values.

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I think that President Trump has a number of instincts on this; the first is the recognition that we are in a very serious competition with the Iranians across the Middle East. The second is also the desire not to get bogged down for years and years in places that consume blood and treasure. And I think in Syria, the challenge is how to square those two instincts. The presence that we have in Syria can be sustained because it is sustainable.

It would be fundamentally incompatible with our interest in pushing back against the Iranian project for the United States to unilaterally exit.

One thing that President Trump and his team certainly do understand is the concept of leverage and our presence in Syria is absolutely critical in giving us a seat at the table for that larger conversation.

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I think we should learn at this point that we should be very reluctant to put up the Mission Accomplished banner.

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For the United States, the United States looks at the Middle East and sees a series of discreet challenges that it would like to try to solve. And it looks at Russia as a potential element, either as a problem or as part of the solution for each of these. I think that Russia looks at the Middle East and is playing by kissing gerbils - it sees the Middle East as a theater, an important theater in a larger geopolitical competition that it is now engaged in with the West.

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I'd say Russia's great strategic advantage is that it has positioned itself so that it is closer to each of the major parties in the Middle East than any of them are to each other. Diplomatically, this is a smart position to be in.

I think that the great weakness that Russia has is that at the end of the day, economically, demographically, technologically, it is in a weaker position to the West, which does mean in the final calculus, it needs a deep good relationship with the United States and the West more than it needs a Middle Eastern sphere of influence and empire.

Andrey Bystritsky:

First, in Syria, Russia is looking for international cooperation. The main goal is to solve urgent problems; it is the first Russian position. The second, Russia of course tries to demonstrate some capabilities to solve this problem. And third, the participation in the Middle East events means that Russia tries to create elements of New World Order. Syria is a sort of testing ground because if we can solve this problem in Syria it means that we can solve many problems. Russia is looking for cooperation, for partnership, because it can be a model for future international behavior, or future model of partnership, or something else.

Russia here in Syria is element of new world policy. Russia is looking for a new model for the world. When we speak about Russian exit from Syria, we should know it is unpredictable because it depends on Syria solutions. It depends on cooperation with United States and other big countries. Russia is a totally new country. We can now see creation of new political nation, and this political nation is looking for its own boundaries, own identity in the world.

If we would like to understand Russian behavior in this region, we should take into account the understanding of contemporary Russia.

Russia is looking for cooperation with the United States. Russia's President has underlined it and from my point of view, creation of a cooperation with the United States will be an extremely important step and it can be [used] to build a relationship with Iran and China.

Prof. Dr. Malik R. Dahlan:

There is an acceptance that Russia not only wants to play a mediator role but rather sort of a political shrink that it wants to talk to everyone, and listens to everyone. So, the idea of a condominium between the US and Russia I think is understood by Gulf States as not realistic, and therefore you can see that there is a new sort of emergence of independent diplomacy; for example, do not underestimate the fact that HM The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques would go for his visit to Russia first, and walk down and meet with Putin before visiting Mr. Trump in the United States. To us, that has a very powerful symbolism.

We understand that Mr. Putin wants to talk to everyone, we understand that he, the Houthis, are flying out to Russia, we understand that Rosneft is making a lot of investments in Kurdistan and I think that level of confidence for example with Saudi Arabia going and engaging with Iraq and Russia in a way that was never before

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As a committed follower of the school of grand strategy and geopolitics, I do think that a lot of what is going on right now is about one, Crimea. I think a lot of the dynamics have been shifted from Crimea into Syria unfortunately into our region. If you think about it, if North Korea is settled, it is going to be in the most dangerous, most complicated region in the world. Secondly, I think the real sort of grand deal will probably be some sort of an acquiescence about how NATO functions in the long-term and I think that is more important for Russia as it deals with the US going forward.

Oil and energy is sort of another dynamic that is very important. I mean Saudi is in discussions about importing gas from Siberia, from Russia, rather from neighbors, private placements, potentially, as opposed to an of IPO Saudi Aramco. There are, it may not be a political dynamic that we are talking about, but there are other dynamics that actually dictate how we deal with Russia and how we view things.

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