

CHAPTER «POLITICAL SCIENCES»

THE SYRIAN KNOT IN THE “TWILIGHT” OF THE POLITICS OF MIDDLE EASTERN PLAYERS

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Abstract. In the Middle Eastern geostrategic complex Syria [the Syrian Arab Republic] occupies a special place. The first state formations on the territory of modern Syria dates back to the 2nd millennium BC. Assyria, the Hittite and Babylonian kingdoms, the era of Alexander the Great, the times as part of the Roman and Ottoman empires left a significant cultural and historical mark on the Syrians in the world's cultural heritage, and the large Syrian ethnic community is an example of peaceful coexistence. However, as history shows, the greatest dangers came to Syria from outside. Throughout the 20th century, Syria actually found itself in a regime of permanent upheavals. By the end of the 1950s, France and Great Britain which professed [and profess] a policy of “spheres of influence” in the Middle East, tried to reshape the country, and since the 1960s Damascus has been embroiled in the contradictions of an endless peace-war process which was marked by the era of regional Arab-Israeli wars. Syria still feels the

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force of the consequences of the wars of 1967 and 1973 [Israel's occupation of the Dutch Heights].

The 21st century brought Syria the “Arab Spring” [2011], civil war, the overthrow of the B. Assad regime [2024] and a time of new uncertainty. Since then, we have been observing another attempt by Syrians to build a peaceful Syria based on mutual understanding and respect for the diversity of forms of spiritual and cultural traditions of the peoples living on its territory. For the political force “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham” which is in power in Syria today the complexity of this task is dictated by harsh reality. Internal humanitarian problems, which are caused by the long-term civil conflict, are exacerbated by the powerlessness of the authorities in the cities, the lack of control over the entire territory of the country, membership in the terrorist international and the contradictory strategies regarding the fate of Syria of its main allies, partners and opponents. Therefore, the Syrian political reality dictates support and resources from outside, and the politics of the “circle of friends”, according to the laws of the genre, requires concessions and obtaining one's own benefit.

Such a retrospective picture of the Syrian issue requires a more thorough analysis of Syrian realities in the context of rapid changes in the international order of the 21st century and the military-political situation in the region.

The author's novelty is determined by the purpose, structure and logic of the study which covers time, space and country-specific reactions to the Syrian events of both the countries of the region and other players in world politics. This made it possible to unravel the tangle of events, the content of which is hidden by informational noise and the art of politicians to hide their true goals in the environment of mass consciousness.

The purpose. The purpose of the study is to resolve the Syrian knot in the Middle Eastern geostrategic complex as a result of the relentless projection of “soft” and “hard” power by the main players of world and regional politics which has been going on for the past 70 years. The combination of theoretical and methodological, political and applied, and informational tools made it possible to clarify the most controversial events and facts of Syrian history and the strategy of the struggle for influence in the region of Syria's neighboring countries and countries that seek to maintain good relations with it due to their common spiritual and cultural affiliation and common history. The achievement of the goal was facilitated by the tasks,

the content of which is disclosed in three sections of the study. The sections are organically interconnected and reflect the mechanism for revealing the problem posed.

Methodology. The research has been carried out using comparative, dialectical, historical and systemic methods. This has allowed us to consider the phenomenon of the Syrian “knot” on the Middle Eastern map as a holistic picture of the contradictions between the main players, to identify its features and retrospective.

Results. The foreign policy goals and strategies of the main Middle Eastern players in the new round of the game around post-Assad Syria have been revealed. Their views on the Syrian historical perspective and the modern practice of the already declared priorities have been clarified. It has been stated that Turkey, the USA and Russia as geopolitical competitors in the region seek to maintain and expand their military presence, and Israel, in order to ensure security from the north, has “preventively” expanded the occupation zone of the Golan Heights [January 2025]. It has been noted that in the views of the European community – the EU, the new leadership of Syria must first of all ensure human rights and freedoms and the functioning of democratic institutions, among which free elections have been in the first place throughout the country.

Practical implications. The results of the study can be used in the block of humanitarian disciplines that consider issues of international politics and regional security.

Value/originality. The scientific novelty of the study lies in revealing the ontological foundations of the Middle East conflict, the permanent force of which is given by the contradictions of the history of Syria and the competition of national interests of the main players. The Syrian node is considered in three aspects: domestic political, border security and regional political. It is proved that with the coming to power in the country of the political force “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham”, the game for the Syrian heritage enters a new stage of struggle, in which the policy of “forceful decisions” will dominate, and not compromises. In this game, the new government in Syria, due to its dependence on external influences, has been assigned the role of a figurant.

Conclusions. The events surrounding Syria in the last 15 years have convincingly proven a simple thing of big politics: “if you want peace,

prepare for war”. This in no way means creating a conflict environment with neighbors on the borders, or entering into competing alliances. Rather, it is a synthesis of the competencies and art of politicians in using the resources of “soft” and “hard” power of society and the state in achieving national harmony and the stability of the social system to possible shocks both inside and outside the country. Over the past 30 years, Syria has proven to be the most unstable state formation in the Middle Eastern geostrategic complex, which external forces have taken advantage of, and the country’s politicians and elite have demonstrated their inability to resist these threats. Today, in post-Assad Syria, we are witnessing a new phase of the formation of another, but already pro-Turkish “Syrian node”, which may develop into a new escalation of violence in the region and a radical reformatting of the security space.

1. Introduction

Before proceeding to the main issue, let us clarify the terms “twilight” and “twilight of politics”. In understanding the essence of the Syrian conflict, this is of great importance, if only because in the last 15 years it has been involved in a number of issues of a theoretical-methodological, political-applied and informational nature. Taken together, this is the key to decoding the canvas of the world picture where an event/object captured in time as a certain reality is determined not by the figures depicted on it, but by the background on which they are located. Such a message to human rationality as an instrument of cognition where the historical and the present, the present and the hidden, the tragic and the comic, the aggressive and the peaceful, according to a Japanese proverb, are present is the most correct way to achieve clarity and understanding of what is happening.

Scientific practice knows many examples when certain representatives of science were in their own recipes and approaches in studying the depth of social problems. For example, in the “Fundamentals of the Philosophy of Law” [1820] G. Hegel proposed to study the state and society through a “framework approach”, that is, within a certain time – the stage of development of capitalism. The task of philosophy, according to G. Hegel, is to understand the time/era of life and the way of thinking, and the tool of knowledge should be wisdom as the well of knowledge of humanity [1, p. 1-13].

This approach was encapsulated by G. Hegel in the metaphorical expression “Minerva’s owl flies out only at dusk.” Its modernization can be interpreted as follows: a person can speak about something consciously only with time [dusk], when it [something] has ended, and it itself has reached the level of wisdom [Minerva] to understand what had happened. So it is not about the flow of various events in society and in the country, but about their nature.

In political studies, the term “nature” was first revealed by Aristotle in his work “Politics”. The theory of “nature” arose from biological and social studies. To do this, Aristotle combined the biological, social and political. The philosopher’s thoughts were built on the following logic: human nature is similar to the nature of plants – states exist for the sake of a better life [as a condition for human development] and higher development for the mind – the state is natural because it has the opportunity for its development. Events and changes that continuously occur in society are a process in which the forces of growth begin to master the conditions necessary for their development [2, p. 131-132].

One of the main conditions for the development of society and the state according to Aristotle is political activity. In politics, a politician cannot do anything of his own free will, but he can choose the path that at least directs him to the best and most acceptable development of social institutions and human life. In modern states, this path, as a result of a reasonable choice, is materialized in national security strategies that have internal and external aspects and reflect national interests. It is they [national interests] that today are the indicator that signals to the main players in world politics about probable zones [geographical areas] and spheres of possible conflicts between the main players on the world stage.

Given the specifics of the stated topic, it should be noted that there are no targeted and holistic studies that would shed light on the nature of the contradictions in the Middle East in its modern dimension. The existing discourse is purely fragmentary [in terms of issues] and local-regional studies in nature. An example of such approaches are editorial and author’s articles that are regularly published under the auspices of Reuters, Euronews and other major news agencies. Articles by individual authors that cover current problems and events are also fragmentary in content.

2. The Syrian knot in the distance of time, or why it happened

For the phenomenon of “national interests” the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries is symptomatic – the time of the collapse of the model of the two-polar world, when country studies strategies acquired a more public and open character through the tool of scientific research and reflections of high-ranking politicians. Regarding the stated topic, it is appropriate to call the names of such authors as G. Kissinger, Z. Brzezinski, J. Feldheim, R. Aron, S. Huntington, J. Goodbye, F. Fukuyama, etc. All of them are contemporaries of the era of Middle Eastern events and to one degree or another had their own position on the assessment of this time. But, the undoubted advantage, for example, of G. Kissinger and Z. Brzezinski is that they had experience working in the US State Department and knew better than anyone how the “kitchen” of big politics in Washington works. This gives their works a special political and applied sound which somewhat lifts the curtain on the art of assessing the situation and the tools of possible influence in regions of the world important to the United States, which official documents do not contain due to the specifics of their compilation.

Unlike the genius of Hegel, where “twilight” is the time when philosophy begins to paint with its “gray paint on gray,” that is, when life “has grown old,” the term “twilight of politics” is more mysterious. Its content is determined by the passage of time, changes in the strategies of players and the dynamics of interests in the categories of power, and its semantic-modal series is more sophisticated, and at the same time speculative. Therefore, “twilight of politics” should be perceived as a state of endless flow of strategies of the parties [subjects] of the military-political processes, events, comments and informational discord on social platforms of the Internet regarding a certain region of the world, which does not allow for an operational and accurate assessment of the content of the parties’ intentions and the prospects of what is happening.

As the practice of making political decisions regarding events in the Middle East shows, reaction as a measure of time is a very expensive resource in the activities of a real politician, behind whom the lives of tens of thousands of people stand. And in this matter, as stated by G. Kissinger. the most striking example is Syria and the “Syrian cataclysm” [3, p. 105-110]. It [the “Syrian cataclysm”] accumulated in itself the contradictions of interests of external players in the Middle East region, blatant social

problems, a split along the lines of coexistence of ethnic and religious communities, a political crisis in the country and the loss of faith of the population in the authorities and the president of the country.

In the great geopolitics of the Middle East, the countries of the Middle East in general and Syria in particular occupy a special place. With the advent of the Suez Canal project [1869] and the era of big oil [1960s-1970s], the problems of the region and Syria have actually formed the agenda of the leading institutions of international politics and have become central issues of the foreign policy efforts of the leading countries. No matter how the Great Game of Great Britain, the policy of US “domination”, Russia’s “return to the East”, France’s “Francophony” or Turkey’s “neo-Ottomanism” may reflect, each of these players today seeks to declare their interests and demonstrate their vision of “order” in the region. But no matter how much the world players would like to soften their own narratives of regional and world politics, there are two key issues of survival strategy here. So, it is about free navigation in the world ocean [and this is the issue of control of the Suez Canal] and control over the countries of the Persian Gulf which have large reserves of oil and gas. It is they who today determine the pulse of the world economy, the well-being of the countries of the “golden billion” and the nature of the military-political reactions of world political leaders.

In this regard, it is worth recalling a very interesting document called the “Atlantic Charter” of August 18, 1941. It was drawn up between the USA and Great Britain in critical times for London and provided for permission for the presence of American business in the colonial empire in exchange for America’s support for the fight against fascist Germany. Article 4 of the Charter states that the United States of America and Great Britain, in keeping with their obligations, will strive to ensure a state in which all countries – large and small, victors and vanquished – would have access on equal terms to trade and the world’s raw materials necessary for the economic development of these countries. About this article of the aforementioned document, F. D. Roosevelt’s son Eliot Roosevelt once noted that “its secrets are too deep” [4, p. 318]. However, what was impossible to see in the distant 40s of the 20th century is today acquiring a holistic and almost complete picture both at the global and regional – Middle Eastern – levels.

It is clear that national variations in understanding security issues introduce “frictions” into the already generally adjusted format of relations between the parties to the Middle East process. This is evidenced by the so-called “double standards” in the interpretation of existing problems and the semantic-modal range of their sounding. Today, they determine certain dualisms and shades that are present in the statements of political figures and leaders of world politics. These are slogans such as freedom fighters/terrorists, forces of democracy/dictatorship, freedom/tyranny, harmony/extremism, poverty/prosperity, civil society/traditionalism, etc. The consequence of these contradictory strategies, as stated by G. Kissinger, was “redrawing the political map of Syria and the entire region. In the absence of international agreement and division among the Syrian opposition, he notes, that the uprising in the name of democratic values degenerated into one of the humanitarian disasters of the early 21st century accompanied by a catastrophe of the regional order” [3, p. 105-110]. The scale of the national tragedy and the depth of social upheavals in Syria are shown by one figure: by 2010, 17 million people lived in the country. In 2018, this figure was 10 million.

The trigger for the Syrian drama of the 21st century was two factors. The first internal factor is the prolonged drought in the country and the rapid impoverishment of a significant portion of the country’s population. The second external factor is the “Arab Spring”, which developed into an irreconcilable political confrontation among the political forces in the country, and later into a civil war.

As for the first factor, it contains a climatic and political-economic component. Scientists from the University of California at Santa Barbara [USA] in the course of the study came to the conclusion that one of the causes of the conflict in Syria could be global warming, which was preceded by a three-year drought, reports the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Weather data on the territory of Syria, starting from 1931, revealed a constant, albeit small, decrease in the amount of precipitation in the winter and an annual increase in average air temperature. This led to the fact that from 2006 to 2009, the soil of the northern provinces of the country, due to the deprivation of moisture, almost did not yield a harvest. The spread of the parasitic fungus further reduced the sowing of various crops [5].

Neighboring Turkey has also made a significant negative contribution to the water resource situation. The fact is that in the 1970s, Turkey began implementing an ambitious project to develop Southeastern Anatolia. The project involves the creation of a cascade of hydroelectric power plants on the Euphrates, as well as irrigation systems for 1.7 million hectares of land. Syria and Iraq have announced their projects to develop the hydropower and irrigation potential of the Euphrates River. However, the river's flow resource does not allow the three countries to implement projects of "excessive desires of the parties", and they themselves cannot reach an agreement. Attempts by the leadership of Syria and Iraq to resolve this issue peacefully have ended in vain. Turkey has taken an absolutely uncompromising position on this issue which it adheres to this day.

As a result, the combination of negative factors led to a mass emigration of the population from rural areas to large cities, and the cities, accordingly, were not ready for such an influx. The urban population has grown by almost 50%, and unemployment and rapid property stratification has turned Syria into the poorest and most unpredictable country in the Middle East. In addition, at this time, Syria became a place of emigration of a large number of people from Iraq, who also sought salvation from political confrontation and drought in the country.

The combination of these factors significantly increased the level of social tension in large cities, and food, water, and housing turned into barometers of social peace and tranquility. Under such extreme conditions, the social system could not actually take the blow and continue to function within the normal range.

The factor of the "Arab Spring" for Syria turned out to be a "powder keg", in a "paper house", where all its inhabitants pursued "each his own". The desire of ordinary citizens to survive in conditions of glaring social problems mixed with the struggle of opposition forces to change the regime at any cost. Against this background of socio-economic crisis, the government in the person of President B. Assad sought support from outside, because in conditions of growing internal chaos it became almost impossible to maintain stability. And if B. Assad was supported by Russia and China, then the geography of countries that supported the opposition in Syria stretched from Washington and Brussels to Riyadh and Karachi.

In the conditions of the crisis of power these forces began to determine the external background of the Syrian avant-garde, and the difference in their interests was manifested in the nature and goals of international coalitions which at that time began to operate on the territory of the country. In terms of time, it is appropriate to consider the events in Syria within the framework of four stages. The first is 2011-2015. The second is 2015-2018. The third is 2018-2024. The fourth began at the end of 2024.

Each of the stages has its own tragic content and behind-the-scenes political game, the manifestation of which was the escalation of violence and shaky political agreements, which over time showed their counter-productiveness and political “twilight” of the game [6, p. 398-400].

The first stage is characterized by the fact that by the end of 2015, the internal political conflict in the country between the forces supporting President B. Assad and the opposition gradually transformed into the most odious terrorist project “DAISH/ISIL”. The “Islamic State” controlled almost 90 % of the country’s territory and, thanks to the victorious march of Sharia ideas, became the most influential force in the region. The radical Islamic project challenged not only regional stability, but also the entire international order. Syria became a place of attraction for religious terrorism which rapidly took over the countries of Europe and the USA. And as unpleasant as it may sound for the political elite of the USA and European countries, this was facilitated by the so-called “double standards” and the division of the world into “ours and others”. Close contacts of ISIS leaders with the special services of Western countries [USA and Great Britain] and Turkey, which gave its leaders political and military dividends, were intertwined with financial and resource [recruitment of fighters] support for the activities of “DAISH/ISIS” from the monarchical regimes of certain Persian Gulf countries. The symptoms of this period of the tragic history of Syria are reflected by two facts. According to official reports of the Syrian authorities, at this time citizens of 82 countries are participating in the militant groups, and their total number exceeds 100 thousand people. The second fact – according to D. Shedd – deputy head of US military intelligence, there were more than 1.2 thousand various armed formations in Syria, the goals and directions of which are impossible to understand. In his opinion, these groups will fight not so

much for an idea as for territory and they will not go home even when everything is over [7, p. 4-6].

Coordination of actions within the two coalitions led by the USA and Saudi Arabia has left Syria with no prospects for its existence on the political map. This is evidenced by the fact that in 2015, B. Assad's power was actually limited to the external borders of Damascus.

The achievements of the second period were the creation of a third pro-Syrian coalition consisting of Russia, Turkey, Iran and Syria and the adoption of the Sochi Memorandum on Syria on 17.09.2018. Thanks to Assad's military support for the period 2015-2018, the Syrian government already controlled almost 80 % of the territory, the forces of the terrorist international were actually defeated, and he himself began a peaceful dialogue with the moderate opposition. This was facilitated by the Coordination Center for Reconciliation of the Warring Parties which coordinated its activities with the American Center for Reconciliation in Amman [Jordan] and the working group in Geneva. The most tangible successes of the reconciliation center include the creation of de-escalation zones throughout Syria, the return of state authorities to these areas, and the start of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress [Sochi, January 2018].

However, in the reconciliation, the most sensitive zone remained only the province of Idlib, which, according to political agreements between the parties to the conflict, became a kind of "controlled" enclave of anti-government armed groups. Ankara undertook to resolve this "knot" within 2-3 months. But as is customary in big politics, later it reformatted this "resource of power" into its own military-political instrument in Syria and pressure on Damascus. Compared to the military component of the peacekeeping mission, the political component turned out to be more controversial and ineffective. The peace process stalled and ultimately failed. The game of politicians once again reflected one simple truth: interests to interests differ due to the contradictory nature of the national spirit.

The third stage was a time of "emptiness" of great diplomacy. It revealed differences between Ankara and Moscow in the implementation of the Sochi Memorandum of September 17, 2018 and the Moscow Agreements of March 5, 2020. This meant that the intra-Syrian dialogue was effectively blocked. Turkey began to demonstrate its vision of the future of Syria,

but already within the framework of the “policy of “neo-Ottomanism” of President R.T. Erdogan. The situation was exacerbated by the position of the countries of the American and Saudi coalitions which continued to ignore B. Assad’s Syria and deny any contacts. This concerned not only the political level of relations, but even the humanitarian one. At a time, when the population of Syria suffered from a lack of the most necessary things – food, medicine, and the lack of social infrastructure, the US and its allies continued to rely on the Syrian opposition. The only example of Damascus’ success during this time was Syria’s return to the Arab League which took place on May 7, 2023 [8].

The fourth stage began in December 2024 and marked the so-called “unexpected” offensive of opposition forces on the largest cities of Syria, Aleppo and Damascus. In the conditions of transparency of the military-political situation in the “risky” areas of Syria, in the list of which the Idlib district [from where the offensive began] occupied the first and most dangerous place, the term “unexpected” looks like an absurdity of common sense, which has ceased to feel the threat when it is nearby. The Syrian phenomenon of this absurdity was the result of the synthesis of two factors of national realities – this is the fatigue and indifference of officials and government structures to protect the state of B. Assad and the loss of faith of the power structures [primarily the army] in the president as a guarantor of a more prosperous life in a new and more socially just Syria. The marching of columns of Syrian army soldiers [without weapons] towards the borders of Iraq, while the units of “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham” occupied Aleppo and approached Damascus, became a symbolic sign of the level of “gap” and distrust of the broad strata of the country’s population towards B. Assad and the fatigue of Syrians from the war in the country. In this situation Damascus experienced a “turn of history”, and the “unlearned lesson” of the Arab Spring, where the contradictions of Syrian realities were vividly reflected by the slogan “anyone but Assad”. The act of absolute indifference of EVERYONE against the AUTHORITY actually opened the way to power for “Hayat Tahrir al-Sham” – a force that not so long ago was a structure of ISIS, and the new leader of the country Ahmed al-Sharaa was not so long ago Abu Muhammad al-Julani. In addition, the ideological current of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is defined by radical Sunni Islam which in the historical relief of the ethno-national and religious life of the country looks like a very

risky phenomenon, behind which lies the shadow of the orders and crimes of Al-Qaeda. It is not so easy to throw all this out of the memory of Syrians and establish civil peace.

3. The Great game around post-assad Syria: who wants what?

In the great game around the legacy of post-Assad Syria there are objectively a number of issues as key aspects of Syria's weight on the Middle Eastern stage which will set the rhythm of the political pulse in the region. Not in vain, this also applies to the course of the new government. In the life of Syrian society, they are present both at the level of certain ideas and at the level of practices of their implementation. But, unfortunately, the Syrians were let down by the political component of society, the excessive ambitions of regional and ethnic elites, and the greed of power which led these ideas to absurdity and civil war.

Political and historical aspect. The national vision of the path of development of Syria began with the coming to power of the Baath Party [1963] – the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party and its leader Hafez Assad – the father of Bashar Assad. The organization itself was created in Damascus in 1947. Its main guidelines were “Unity, Freedom, Socialism” and “A United Arab Nation with an Immortal Mission”. The combination of the ideas of anti-imperialism, liberation struggle, Arab nationalism, overcoming the fragmentation of the Arab world and creating a powerful state, protecting the oppressed classes and establishing social justice contributed to the involvement of the intelligentsia, youth and the “middle” class of the population in the ranks of the party, who saw the prospect of a new life in the right of “controlled ownership” by the state. Among the three historical centers of the Arab East – Egypt [Cairo], Baghdad [Iraq] and Damascus [Syria], Damascus is considered the “heart” of the East and the birthplace of the ideology of Arab unity and the policy of anti-imperialism.

As time has shown, the political ambitions of the troika became hostages of the competition “for leadership” in the region between H. Assad and S. Hussein which was skillfully taken advantage of by the “heavyweights” of the world political arena. Like the “phantoms” of the Sahara, the ambitions of the parties were scattered in a series of Arab-Israeli wars and by the skillful policy of “appeasement” of the USA, Great Britain and France in eliminating threats to their interests from the Arab troika. Today,

Egypt is within the Camp David Accords [1978], Iraq, after the removal of S. Hussein from power [2003], has not managed to extract even the slightest outlines of its own version of democracy, and Syria once again found itself at the crossroads of history in search of a “fulcrum” from which to start.

However, in such a resolution of regional contradictions and the existing specificity of national development, there is an “eternal theme” of the spirit of the East. Its content is determined by social justice and freedom, the ways of achieving which are clearly dissonant with the recipes of liberal democracy offered by high-ranking visiting politicians from European countries and the USA.

For the new authorities in Syria due to their orientation towards certain religious and cultural postulates of organizing social space, and at the same time their absolute dependence on the politics and finances of already declared allies and partners, this issue is critical.

Resource aspect. Until the early 2000s, Europeans considered Damascus [known since the 16th century BC] and Syria in general to be the Mecca of Middle Eastern tourism. The rich historical and cultural heritage, the hospitality of the Syrians, natural and cheap food, affordable prices for all types of housing from the private sector to five-star hotels, the presence of the entertainment and gaming business, a developed transport network, etc. – all this worked for the image of Syria as a successful country. In addition, this image was supported by a strong food and industrial component. Starting from the 60s of the last century with the help of the Soviet Union, more than 40 industrial and energy projects were implemented in Syria, which laid the foundation for its further economic growth [no other country in the world has done this]. At the beginning of the 21st century, the country’s industry was represented by textile, food, chemical, machine-building, oil refining, construction, and other enterprises.

Mineral resources such as oil, natural gas, bitumen, brown coal, iron and manganese ores, chromite, copper, copper, phosphorites, soda, marble, etc. made Syria an honor in terms of the prospects for the presence of foreign capital in the country. Oil revenues provided the country with 40 % of foreign exchange revenues to the state budget of the country, and the Euphrates Hydroelectric Power Plant which was also built with the help of the Soviet Union, produced more than 40 % of the total electricity generation in the country [9, p. 449-452].

Transit aspect. Today, in the big politics of the Middle East, when it comes to transit corridors, first of all, the presence of oil and gas pipelines in the country is meant. It so happened that both nature and history have given modern Syria two factors of world energy policy – oil and gas and pipelines to the sea coast. Before the beginning of the Arab Spring, Syria was part of the club of countries that extract these resources and have the transport potential to deliver them to the ports of the Mediterranean. Companies from Iraq and Saudi Arabia actively have used Syria's services, which brought Damascus considerable foreign exchange revenues to the country's budget, and most importantly, have given it the opportunity to be at the center of the agenda of world energy policy. The shadow of "distrust" towards Damascus, which plays by the established rules, have grown into "danger", when the Syrian government agreed on the project of another oil pipeline. But now it was already about the project with Iran and Iraq. According to Western media reports, in 2014 the parties to the possible contact began consultations regarding such a project. From the point of view of commercial interests, it was beneficial to everyone. This aspect of the issue especially concerned Syria, since all financing was carried out by Iran. However, the new project has been also supposed to solve two purely Iranian problems. It was about eliminating the risks of stopping oil transportation in the Strait of Hormuz due to the US sanctions policy and eliminating the consequences of the threat of closing the strait in the event of a military clash between the US and its allies with Iran [10]. This has become a significant irritant in relations between the collective West and Syria, if only because as a result of the agreement, Tehran has received an alternative route for transporting its energy resources towards Mediterranean ports. In combination with Tehran's nuclear program, such a strategy of Iran has been seen as a challenge to the national security interests of the US and its allies. The consequence of such a step in the field of declared strategies of the US and its allies was that President B. Assad instantly found himself "on the wrong side of history".

The same actors are at the forefront of the next round of the great game around Syria as in previous times, that is, until 2024. So we are talking about the USA, Great Britain, EU countries, Russia, Iran, Israel, Turkey and the countries of the Arab world. The first diplomatic reconnaissance of Western politicians in Baghdad and meetings with representatives of the

new government are more like a meeting of a confused teacher with his student, who, although has done a “good job”, has remained a prisoner of his own ideas about the meaning of life, and most importantly, the rules of the state system. As Anita Prasad from Forbes states, “many Syrians and Western countries, as before, have wary of the new government which was associated with Al-Qaeda until 2016. And although the US, following a visit to Syria by its officials, cancelled the \$10 million reward were for the capture of the new leader of Syria, al-Sharaa, it still classified the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham [HTS] movement which he led, as a terrorist organization. The EU and the UK hold the same position [11]. The UN has also blacklisted HTS since 2014.

Comments by European and American media outlets on the first visits to Syria by senior EU officials in January 2025 indicate, that from now on Damascus will be under the close scrutiny of political and value assessments of what is happening in the country. The heads of the French and German Foreign Ministries, Jean-Noël Barrot and A. Berbock, made it clear that the first steps in supporting the new regime, such as lifting sanctions on Syria and providing the country with financial support, will be linked to the results of fulfilling the basic requirements of liberal democracy – the protection of the rights of women, ethnic and religious groups, and the holding of free elections throughout Syria [12].

The fact that the leader of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, is facing a very “rocky path” in implementing the liberal road map is evidenced at least by the fact of building a European house, where there is a hierarchy of wealth and the problem of opportunities in the search for personal happiness as a level of social well-being of the average citizen. And it [happiness] is associated with the level of material and spiritual benefits received, health care, education, safe living conditions, etc. The expansion of democracy will mean that the number of “protected” people in the country should grow. But the paradox is that for liberals, whose camp is represented by A. Burbock, such a course of events is only a “process”, and not a “final result” in the form of a prize that everyone in general and each in particular should definitely receive. The most consistent supporter of liberalism F. Fukuyama characterized this state as such that “the winner is not so much liberal practice as liberal idea” [13, p. 1038]. Thus, in the Syrian version, where the feeling of “homeland” dominates, the field of European

demands as a set of tools of Western policy turns into an environment that is too risky for the spirit of history and traditionalism of the multiethnic Syrian community.

Unlike visitors from the EU, the political line of the US and Russia in Syria is more pragmatic. They are closely monitoring the situation on the “ground” and how geopolitical competitors monitor each other. The importance of Syria in the Middle Eastern “solitaire” is well known to them. This has been demonstrated quite convincingly by the previous almost 70-year history of the region and recent events. Today, the Americans are interested in the North-Eastern region of Syria. In the Syrian peace-war process, it can be key. So, it is about control over the oil fields of Syria and close contacts with the Kurds, who are striving for their own statehood. Both the first and the second are very nervous for Ankara. To strengthen its arguments Washington plans to carry out another stage of increasing its military contingent. It currently stands at 2 thousand servicemen.

In the American strategy, both issues constitute a considerable resource for influencing Syrian domestic political processes, and most importantly, they will keep Turkey, which has repeatedly demonstrated its own line of behavior that is different from Washington's, in a state of “tension” [14]. In order to warm relations between Washington and the new government in Syria, the United States has lifted sanctions restrictions and temporarily allowed a number of financial transactions.

Russia's interests in Syria are reflected in the Kremlin's diplomatic efforts to maintain two bases in Syria – the naval base in Tartus and the air force base in Khmeimim. In the first statement by the spokesman for the transitional government of Syria, O. Arnaut, Moscow was sent a message that in the new conditions of Syria, “Russia must reconsider its presence on Syrian territory, as well as its interests” [15]. Later, according to Russian media reports, the tone and content of the statements were somewhat adjusted. It was stated that the al-Sharaa government does not demand the immediate withdrawal of Russian bases from Syria and considers Russia as a strategic partner with whom Damascus may have common strategic interests. The discussion was about the prospects for cooperation between the parties in the military, economic and humanitarian spheres. As experts note, the change in the Syrian leadership's position in the negotiation process is dictated, first of all, by the government's hope for Moscow's

help in returning the already lost territories. It seems that in this mission the new authorities in Damascus hope to rely on both Turkey and Russia. However, this does not mean in any way that Turkey's presence in the northern regions of Syria can end earlier than Israel's presence in the Syrian Golan Heights. History has shown that this issue in the politics of these two countries-opposites of the Middle East can move into the category of "deadlock issues" of national security. This is despite the fact that Turkey is a member of NATO, and Israel, within the framework of the NATO Initiative "Mediterranean Dialogue" and the special Strategic Partnership with the United States, is actually an associated member of the bloc. Within the framework of this partnership, Washington has pledged to provide Israel with \$38 billion in military aid from 2019 to 2028 [16].

Thus, the contradictions of Middle Eastern policy and the border geography of Syria have given Damascus a very dangerous and very controversial military-political climate. The Turkey-Iran-Israel triangle is a permanent Middle Eastern Bermuda where the contradictory nature of the parties' interests can simultaneously cause another explosion in the entire region. The neo-Ottomanism of President T. Erdogan clearly competes with the theocracy of Iran, and the security policy of Israeli Prime Minister B. Netanyahu in the Middle Eastern game around two states [Palestine and Israel] on the lands of historical Palestine meets with considerable resistance from Istanbul and Tehran. In addition, the pro-Iranian Hezbollah [headquarters in Lebanon] and the pro-Turkish Hamas [headquarters in the Gaza Strip – Israel], which are enemies of Tel Aviv, communicate with their patrons through the territory of Syria. Since then, the security picture of the region has been in the dialectic of the "eternal" struggle for control of territories. Its content is determined by "T. Erdogan's desire to strengthen his influence on the government in Syria, where he acts as its sponsor" and "Israel's opposition to Turkish and Iranian influence by maintaining relations with Syrian Kurdish groups within the framework of its security interests" [17].

The precarious situation in the relations between the parties was further aggravated by the "rapid offensive" of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham units in early December 2024 which occurred from the zone of Idlib province [Syria]. At that time the zone was controlled by Turkey under agreements with Moscow and Damascus, and according to the expert community,

this could not have happened without the “consent” of Ankara. This can be regarded as a counter-move by Ankara to the expansion of the Golan Heights occupation zone by Israel and its warning about the decisiveness of actions in a new branch of the Syrian conflict [17; 18]. There is no doubt that Tel Aviv sees Turkey’s footprint in the change of power in Syria. For this, Israel has the Mossad. Tel Aviv began eliminating a new threat to its own security with air strikes on the Syrian city of Tartus – the base of the Syrian Navy, warehouses and arsenals with weapons, military airfields and air defense positions [19]. The IDF did this work without any risk of losses for itself, because at that time the Syrian army had actually abandoned its positions, and its units were marching in columns to the borders with Iraq.

As a result, the security issue of the parties to the “triangle” has acquired not only too aggressive rhetoric, such as the destruction of each other, but also the expansion of the geography of security borders with military infrastructure. As experts from The Jerusalem Post state, “the turbulent relations between Israel and Turkey are leading to even greater turbulence. The events in Syria are pitting the two countries against each other in what could escalate into a direct armed clash”. The fact that “the likelihood of a future military confrontation between Israel and Turkey exists”, says Bar-Ilana, an expert at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies from Turkey. “This is unprecedented, like all the events we have witnessed in the region recently”, he continued [17].

The situation in the region will deteriorate significantly with the implementation of Turkey’s plans to build two military bases in Syria and station F-16 fighters there. In January 2025, citing sources, the Türkiye newspaper reported that Turkey and Syria would sign a joint defense agreement. According to the agreement, Ankara would provide Syria with significant military assistance and economic support. The agreement also provides for the training of Syrian military personnel and military pilots. 50 F-16 fighters and military contingents will be stationed at the combined military bases [20]. The fact that the publication was not mistaken is evidenced by the visit of Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa to Ankara on February 4, 2025 and the signing of a joint defense agreement with President T. Erdogan [21]. At the same time, Ankara stated, that Turkey was against the location of any military bases of other countries in Syria. This applies to the bases of the United States and Russia [22]. So, Turkey is playing

its game and, by raising the stakes, is demonstrating who is the “master of the situation”.

As for the countries of the Arab world, the most noticeable efforts are being made by Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar. A notable event in establishing dialogue was the visit to Damascus of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, in January 2025. They are trying to support the Islamist government of the new Syria with humanitarian, energy and law enforcement [training of civilian police] assistance, despite concerns about the latter’s jihadist past. This policy reflects the tactics of promoting their interests, countering the influence of Turkey and Iran and preventing the spread of political Islam in the region. It seems that the consequences of the “Arab Spring” [the overthrow of the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya] have made the regimes of these countries more sensitive to issues of social justice and political openness to the world [20].

It is symptomatic that under these conditions, the interim president of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, made his first foreign visit to the Saudi Arabian capital, Riyadh, on February 2, 2025. As Bloomberg defines it, this visit comes at a time when al-Sharaa is trying to turn Damascus towards the Persian Gulf and Arab states, as well as to rebuild Syria and its economy, which have suffered from the civil war [23].

4. Conclusions

1. Over the past 30 years, Syria has proven to be the most unstable state in the Middle Eastern geostrategic complex. Internal challenges and external threats have become a formidable test of the flexibility of the Syrian government and the “elasticity” of the social system in its ability to take blows and continue to function within normal limits. The country’s politicians and elite have demonstrated their inability to withstand natural, internal socio-political and external aggressive shocks.

2. The modern Syrian knot has three circles of problematic issues. The first circle is the crisis of Syrian society as a national-cultural and political unit – “we are Syrians”. The second circle is an explosive border environment which is formed by the interests of Turkey, Iran and Israel. The third circle is the regional interests of the countries of global politics of the USA, Russia, Great Britain and the EU countries. As a result of the game

of double standards, as the apogee of liberal democracy, Syria gradually became a hostage to the competition of interests of stronger, more persistent and aggressive players.

3. Today, Syria is in a state of risky game of fate where the “modernized past” and “myths of the present” compete. Syrians, like humanity as a whole, create an environment around themselves that does not correspond to the nature of their spiritual and cultural world. Deception as a result of the game of history [Hegel] may again befall the Syrians if the wisdom of the East and the coexistence of the peoples of Syria sinks into captivity of “sweet promises”.

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