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The Middle East:

Anticipating Further Escalations and Conflicts

The situation in the Middle East remains highly complex and ambiguous. Although the ceasefires in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, as well as political changes in Syria, may be seen as signs of potential resolution, it is too early to speak of a complete end to the conflicts.

Trump's Airborne Visions

On January 20, just hours before the start of his first working day, U.S. President Donald Trump described the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip as “epic” and characterized it as the first step toward long-term peace in the region. This agreement, which came into effect on the eve of Trump's inauguration, along with the election of a new president in Lebanon and the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, has sparked hopes for an end to three key conflicts that have long defined the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

Despite positive developments the path to peace in the Middle East remains fraught with challenges

These events have become symbols of a possible shift in regional dynamics, where the thawing of “political ice” opens prospects for peace, stability, and even a transformation of global geopolitics. In particular, they have brought closer the possibility of Saudi Arabia joining the “Abraham Accords”—a series of agreements to normalize relations between Israel and Arab countries, which were actively promoted by the Trump administration.

However, despite the optimism, many issues remain unresolved, making the future of these conflicts highly uncertain. In the coming years, the region is likely to continue facing

significant challenges. Chief among these is the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has the potential to explode at any moment. Moreover, Trump's overtly pro-Israeli policies have pushed the issue of establishing an independent Palestinian state to the back burner.

The Situation in Gaza: A Fragile Truce

The ceasefire agreement in Gaza, which ended a 15-month conflict that claimed the lives of nearly 47,000 Palestinians, may prove short-lived. Even Trump, who played an active role in brokering the agreement, has expressed doubts about its sustainability.

One reason for the instability is the complex structure of the agreement, which consists of three phases, each requiring new negotiations. This creates fertile ground for potential crises as the parties move toward more complicated stages. Israel and Hamas, who distrust each other, have different objectives. Israel aims to secure the return of hostages and the complete destruction of Hamas, while Hamas, which suffered heavy losses during the war, seeks a temporary ceasefire and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza, while maintaining its resistance policy against the occupation.

Despite heavy losses, including the deaths of top Hamas leaders such as Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, the group remains undefeated. Following the ceasefire, Hamas quickly regained control over security and began rebuilding basic infrastructure in parts of Gaza. The group's leaders show no signs of surrender and view Israel's inability to destroy Hamas at this stage as a victory.

However, the worst-case scenario could be an attempt by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to annex Palestine with Trump's explicit support. Trump has previously called for the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which could lead to a new wave of violence. Additionally, Trump's proposal to relocate Palestinians to Jordan and Egypt and "clear" Gaza of Palestinians has drawn sharp criticism from the international community and has been rejected by both the Palestinian Authority and the Arab countries themselves. Such ill-considered statements undermine trust in the peace process and exacerbate tensions in this volatile region.

Lebanon: Hopes for Stability

In Lebanon, the election of a new president on January 9, after two and a half years of political deadlock, has raised hopes for overcoming the government crisis and strengthening the ceasefire with Israel. Over the past year, Israeli strikes in Lebanon have resulted in the deaths of approximately 4,000 people and injured more than 6,000. Among the dead were Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and several high-ranking members of the group.

Israel has also conducted large-scale operations in southern Lebanon aimed at destroying Hezbollah's military infrastructure and preventing attacks on Israeli cities. These actions have led to mass displacement of Lebanese and Palestinian residents, further complicating the situation.

An optimistic scenario suggests that the election of General Joseph Aoun as president and the formation of a new government under reformist Nawaf Salam could be a step toward stability and peace with Israel. However, Hezbollah, despite its losses, remains a powerful force in Lebanon and is unlikely to relinquish its influence or its ongoing struggle against Israel.

The extension of the Israeli military presence in southern Lebanon until February 18, despite initial plans for withdrawal, underscores the fragility of the agreement. Any resumption of conflict between Israel and Hezbollah could have catastrophic consequences for Lebanon and the entire region.

Syria: Challenges After the Fall of Assad

The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December, after 13 years of civil war, has raised hopes for the country's reintegration into the international community after years of isolation. However, the formation of a new government in Damascus is accompanied by significant challenges, including the need to rebuild a country torn apart by internal conflicts and external interference.

One of the main challenges is the return of millions of Syrian refugees, as well as the reconstruction of the state and society after decades of dictatorship under the Assad family. The new government will undoubtedly need to unite the country, taking into account the interests of various ethnic and religious groups that have been fighting each other for years.

A key issue remains the behavior of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), a former affiliate of al-Qaeda* that now controls significant parts of Syria. The international community is watching to see whether HTS can change its previous policies and become a responsible partner in the region. Although the new Syrian authorities have promised to open the economy to foreign investment and privatize state assets, their success will depend on their ability to create an inclusive political system capable of uniting the country.

The path to peace

Despite positive developments, such as the ceasefire in Gaza, the election of a new president in Lebanon, and the fall of Assad's regime in Syria, the path to peace in the Middle East remains fraught with challenges. The main problem is the lack of a clear strategy and concrete plans for resolving conflicts.

Internal divisions and external interference, particularly by the United States, which seeks geopolitical advantage, continue to fuel tensions. Without a viable concept for peaceful conflict resolution, the region's conflicts could persist indefinitely, as has already happened in Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

Thus, while breakthroughs in the Middle East offer hope, their sustainability remains in question. The region needs not only temporary ceasefires but also long-term solutions capable of ensuring lasting peace and stability.

Viktor Mikhin, February 14, 2025

*- Organizations banned in Russia

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