

The Islamic State as a Tool and Pretext for Changing the Regional Balance of Forces: Lessons for the Future

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The longer the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic lasts, the stronger is its impact on the processes in the entire Middle East, dragging more and more states into the funnel of confrontation. Existence of an expanding "grey area" in Syria and Iraq out of control of their central authorities for quite a long time, which the opposition forces, positioning themselves as democratic or, at least, moderate, failed to take under their control, has led to creation of a quasi-state with a dynamically changing borders. With the growth of its political ambitions and against the background of its ideological and propagandist success, reinforced by military victories, this quasi-state has been consecutively changed its name, connecting it with the given region: "The Islamic State of Iraq" (2006), "The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant" ("ISIL," 2013), and finally the geographically indefinite and more comprehensive "Islamic State" (IS, since June 29, 2014).

The main factors, caused its emergence and development, are, in particular, the following: First, underestimation of the support of Syrians to President Bashar al-Assad. Its extent was first displayed by results of the June 3, 2014, elections, when the war was in progress: 88.7 percent of voters supported him. Second, the fact that even after four-and-a-half-year long civil strife, which turned into a rebel war, and under the external economic and political pressure, Syrian authorities still control a territory with almost 80 percent of population of the country. Third, the fact that President al-Assad enjoys the support of citizens-in-arms, consisting of various confessional and ethnic groups, which have taken an active part in the uncompromising and extremely brutal armed, political, informational, and ideological conflict for many years (quite often in the conditions of complete isolation and in blockade without any assistance and support from Damascus). The latter argument, in principle, shows that they have chosen the political position and the side in the conflict rationally.

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2. Overestimation of the strength of the opposition, formally oriented to the US and the European Union, both by the number of its active supporters and by the depth and sustainability of its motivation, and its readiness for a long-term armed confrontation.

3. However, the main factor is an ideological attractiveness, military and mobilization potential of terrorist groups, settled in Syria and Iraq.

These mistakes have directly led to a situation when the Islamic State, due to its excellent detailed knowledge of inter-confessional, inter-ethnic, tribal ties, as well as the contradictions inside the societies in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and the especially brutal way of imposing its law and order, became the main military and political force in opposition to Damascus.

It is necessary to point out that at least experts and analysts in Washington and European capitals understood very well as early as in 2012-2013 that this conglomerate of terrorist organizations would sooner or later become an autonomous and self-sufficient force and one of the main problems for the region. However, in full accordance with the US approach, such as to address the problem only when its solution becomes absolutely urgent – which was applied and completely failed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, – the dangerous IS problem was treated as a secondary threat.

After consideration of expert opinion, a political decision was made. It was based on the assumption that the "problem of the Bashar regime" would be solved soon and, mainly, by the forces of the Syrian moderate opposition. A possible ISIL activation and strengthening were evaluated as side effects. Therefore, it is expected that the ISIL will be neutralized (when necessary and in the event that the situation moves out of control) after the main goal – an overthrow of al-Assad – is achieved.

At the same time, the ISIL was given an indulgence also for its active anti-Assad positioning. The tactics of using this grouping was based on erroneous views that it would be mostly occupied with local problems of strengthening its own structure and the struggle for influence against other terrorist groups, and it would be simply forced to shift the focus of its activity from Iraq¹ to Syria, weakened by the civil war. Outside the controlled territory, the group would confine

¹Iraq enjoyed a wide political support from Washington and had an army, the training and arming of which cost the US an amount of 20 billion USD, and it was supposed to be able to repulse the ISIL.

itself with mobilization efforts, therefore supposedly becoming another tool to overthrow the al-Assad regime.

That is why the problem, related to the ISIL's strengthening its might, lacked a proper attention, enough to prevent the growth of its influence and territorial expansion. It is worth mentioning that a little has been changed since the beginning of the air force operation against it by the US-led international coalition in September, 2014.

Transition of the Islamic State activity from mainly terrorist activity to a rebel war, declaration of the "Caliphate" (June 29, 2014), formation of power structures, massive propaganda of the "righteous Islamic" social policy within the controlled territory, – all these factors have created the image of a successful Islamist business project in the eyes of its supporters from many countries and made it increasingly attractive to recruit their forces and possibilities.

The Canadian-born Andre Poulin, better known as Abu Muslim al-Canadi, expressed this notion in one of the Islamic State's video releases in September, 2014: "You know, there's a role for everybody. Every person can contribute something to the Islamic State... If you cannot fight, then you give money, if you cannot give money then you can assist in technology, and if you can't assist in technology you can use some other skills."²

At the same time, with its reinforcement, the IS has lost one of the advantages, possessed by terrorist organizations. This group has actually obtained not only the attributes and symbols of the state power, but also a wide scope of infrastructure, outlining the borders of the territory under its sustainable control. The objects of infrastructure in this territory however, could be easily identified and eliminated.

However, up to the mid-2014, when Washington and Brussels possibly understood the complete incapability of the moderate Syrian opposition and its insignificant place in the political spectrum of Syria, the IS occupied the leading position in the confrontation with Damascus, and there has not occurred any effective military operation against Bashar al-Assad without its participation.

As a result, the radical solution of the IS issue was actually put off until the "post-Assad" period. It had its negative impact on the effectiveness of the air operation under the US command since September, 2014: in spite of bombings the IS continued to expand its

²The Islamic State. *Al-Hayat Media Presents: Al-Ghuraba the Chosen Few of Different Lands: Abu Muslim from Canada*, July 12, 2014, p.4. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/AlHayatAbuMuslimSubIndo>

territory, strengthen its system of control, increase the budget and intensify attacks against government troops both in Syria and Iraq.

In May, 2015, the IS quite easily occupied Ramadi, a town with 800-thousand population (capital of Iraqi province Anbar, near Baghdad). The IS success in Syria in the summer of 2015 forced President Bashar al-Assad to officially ask Russia for military assistance.

The fact that the main and most dangerous enemy of the Syrian authority became the IS terrorist organization, against which the international coalition fought quite unsuccessfully, provided Russia with an excellent pretext to launch its own air operation: since September 30, 2015, Russian Aerospace Forces have started hitting targets in the IS positions, which, in addition, were also hit by the rockets from the Russian Fleet ships in the Caspian Sea.

The start of the Russian military operation, at least, has stabilized the military situation in Syria and significantly changed the political developments in the region, as a whole. In particular:

- It stopped the IS advancement;
- Strengthened positions of those Sunni movements and groups in Syria, which, due to displeasure with spreading radical Islamism in the country, have made a strategic choice in favor of Bashar al-Assad;
- Split the armed opposition, showing that the current Syrian authorities, besides Iran and the Shia movements of the region, now have a consistent and mighty military ally, for which the overthrow of the al-Assad regime by force is unacceptable. In this situation the stake on the IS becomes losing;
- The main strike on the IS, *Jabhat an-Nusra*, and some other terrorist organizations has raised chances for survival of those groups, which have no any or have unobvious connections with the IS including through their legitimization in the inter-Syrian negotiations process;
- Forced Turkey, in the context of its Kurdish problem, to take decisive steps to prevent the developments in Syria by a scenario, supposing preservation of power in the hands of Bashar al-Assad, who promised to raise the status of Syrian Kurdish regions.

The logic of Turkish actions is based on the conclusion that destabilization of the internal political situation in Syria is irreversible. Its transformation into permanent versatility will be followed by the

alarming increase of social, economic, and political problems – up to the disintegration of the SAR.

Turkey staked a great deal on its view of the Islamic state as aiming to:

- change the political map of the region;
- suppress the Kurdish movement, which gradually becomes an autonomous force in Syria;
- split the Kurdish communities of the region, many of which include significant numbers of IS supporters;
- prevent the strengthening of the Kurdish trans-border solidarity;
- raise a military threat, hanging over the Iraqi Kurdistan. To withstand this threat without Ankara's mediating role will be quite difficult.

Therefore Turkey was forced to defend the IS on the basis of its own strategic interests and despite the prospects to clash with interests of other regional and global powers. That is why the direct participation of Russian armed forces in the Syrian conflict (in which the Islamic State terrorist organization is immediately and actively engaged) has led to an apparent confrontation of interests of Ankara and Moscow.

Historically, relations between Russia and Turkey in the periods, when they are not in at state of war, very much resemble a game of multi-board military-political chess, played on the boards, located in various regions: every game has its own logic, intrigue, pieces, but they are all interconnected, being parts of a big confrontation mosaic. Its elements show up with various degrees of intensity in Moldova and Crimea, the North and South Caucasus, Ural and Central Asia. Against the background of intensified foreign policies of the two states, Syria has become a new area of their most fierce confrontation.

Russia has a huge interest, first, in preserving Syria as its ally in the region, as a link, reinforcing ties between Moscow and Tehran while their geopolitical interests coincide; in continuation and, later on, the intensified use of its military sea base in the city of Tartus; in enlargement of the Syrian market of arms and ammunition for the production of Russian military-industrial complex.

Turkey's interests are stipulated by intensification of its foreign policy in all directions, especially within the borders of the former

Ottoman Empire. In Syria Turkish policy is focused on the solution of such problems as:

- Exclusion of the use of regions of the country with a compact Kurdish population as rear bases of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey;
- Prevention of the acquisition of modern arms from Syrian military warehouses by PKK, one way or another;
- Dismissal of the Alawi elite of the SAR;
- Confrontation with Iran with the prospect of the unanimous Turkish leadership in the region, etc.

Although initially Turkey had no intention to harm Russia's interests in Syria, but because of the objective reasons it reached that point: the incident, like shooting down of the Russian military airplane Su-24 in the sky over Syria on November 24, 2015, had to occur sooner or later. Even more, it can be assumed with high probability that it is not the last incident in bilateral Russian-Turkish relations.

The following two reasons are mentioned most often when explaining the decision of Turkish leadership to order shooting down the Russian bomber, when the latter executed its task of destroying the objects of the IS terrorist organization in the north of Syria:

a) Financial losses of Turkey, and first of all, President Erdoğan clan's losses from the decreased illegal supplies of Syrian oil by the IS;

b) Effectiveness of the operation of Russian Aerospace Forces, destroying the military, industrial infrastructure, and manpower of the IS, which is currently serves as Ankara's objective ally and tool to reshape the balance of forces in the entire Middle East region.

Although these factors are undoubtedly actual, the excessive focusing on the relations between Turkey and the Islamic State without revealing some more profound reasons of Turkey's intention for the armed clash with Russia is fraught with erroneous conclusions on the conflict of interests between R.T. Erdoğan's and his entourage and Moscow. As a result, a notion may come out that it would be possible to tackle the situation and rule out such a precedent in the future by means of a natural change of the political configuration in Turkey itself, although under an external political and economic pressure on the country. In this case it is quite predictable that the stake would be made on a "more adequate" Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu.

However, it seems that the factor of R.T. Erdoğan himself and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the Syrian crisis, as a

whole, and in shooting down the Russian Su-24, in particular, only helped to outline the objective process, developing in the Turkish society, and led to a more open articulation of those goals that the Turkish elite has pursued during the entire existence of the Turkish Republic.

The shooting down of the Russian Su-24 made it clear to the Middle East states (the policy just at this regional level is most important for Turkey) that the degree of Ankara's readiness to defend its strategic interests is extremely high. The incident is a result of decision-making by the same system and it lies in the same level, as Turkey's refusal in 2003 to allow to use its territory and open its borders with Iraq to assist the United States in its operation of overthrowing Saddam Hussein.

At least one direct military clash between the Turkish and US units in July, 2003, should be considered in the same view. Then US servicemen captured eleven fighters of Turkish Special Forces in Northern Iraq. Turkey suffered not so much a military, but quite a sensible moral damage. However, in case of its passivity and mute support to the United States against its own national priorities – followed by Ankara's complete dissociation from any attempts to use the objective situation in Iraq in its interests, –Turkey might have had much more serious image losses, which will be equal to a strategic defeat, if not a disaster, in the Middle East.

After the shooting down of the Russian bomber, which was a clear manifestation of Turkey's posture, all further negotiations at various levels and formats and any agreements that included compromise and concessions (even quite substantial) would in the worst case become viewed as only a tactical defeat for Turkey and then as only an additional provocation for revenge.

At the same time, to avoid the toughest reaction of Russia, Turkey launched several information operations at once, the most visible and straightforward are the following ones:

-Treating the incident as a mistaken identification of the country, to which the Russian military aircraft belonged. (A parallel was made to the Russian MiG-23 of the Syrian air force, which was shot down by the Turkish fighter F-16);

-Attempting to present the event as a forced reaction to a harsh and premeditated violation of the Turkish air border in the conditions of a time deficit to take a proper decision. The Turkish side claimed that Russian pilots did not react to the alleged attempts to establish contact with them;

-Explaining destruction of the SU-24 as a response to Russian strikes against political enemies of Moscow's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and not against terrorists of the so called Islamic State, *Jabhat an-Nusra*, and other structures affiliated with them.

In another, some narrower option, the shooting down of the Russian aircraft was a response to the strikes of Russian Aerospace Forces against Syrian Turkomans, a kindred Turkic people. Turkey protested against these strikes, however, certainly without mentioning that Turkomans in their confrontation with Damascus and in hope for a substantial assistance from Turkey, concluded a tactical agreement with the Islamic State.

Each mentioned information operation was designed for its specific consumer cluster, depending on the degree of its awareness on the political situation in Syria, combat control systems and technical capabilities of military hardware. In this context various, sometimes contradicting statements made by R. T. Erdoğan and other Turkish officials are aimed at widening the possibilities of maneuvering in the future, depending on the developments and reaction of the US and the European Union.

Most probably Erdoğan's tactics will be aimed at limiting the Russian response just by some economic sanctions:

a) At best to such actions as those one that have already lead to decrease the tourist turnover, introduction of visa regime, banning the import of some goods, mainly agriculture products, etc., which seem quite acceptable for R. T. Erdoğan.

b) At worst, Russia can take much more substantial steps, such as Russia's refusal to implement the constructions of the "Turkish stream" gas pipeline and "Akkuyu" nuclear power plant. In this option, some alleviation of economic consequences (under the apparent political support from the United States and some EU states) could be expected from receiving additional preferences for construction of the nuclear power plant in Turkey from corporations in the US nuclear industry, and from increasing investments for gas pipelines from Azerbaijan, Iran, and Iraq as an alternative to the Russian pipeline (with various degrees of preparedness, possibilities for practical implementation and relevant military and geopolitical risks).

It seems that Ankara's readiness for a risk to lose all long-term planning and preparations for its policy towards Russia (in particular, well-established ties, first of all, in economy, and prospects of Turkey's transformation into one of the most powerful hubs for distribution of

gas streams), is based on the detailed analysis of the course of the Russian military air operation in Syria. Supposedly, Turkish analysts have concluded that Ankara's policy is on the verge of the fatal geopolitical defeat in several directions:

-In the Kurdish and Turkoman areas at its southern and south-eastern borders;

-In the pan-Turkic world, covering the Middle East, South Caucasus and Central Asia regions, and partly, Europe (Bulgaria, Albania, Moldova, Crimea and Northern Caucasus of Russia, and others), and China; and

-In the confrontation with the Shiite world, and first of all with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In addition, some news was spread on October 7, 2015, that Iraq also has the intention to officially request for the Russian assistance in the struggle against the Islamic State on its territory.³ Ankara noticed in this move a much more potential danger for its energy interests (both current and perspective), now related to the oil import from the Iraqi Kurdistan. That is why it is possible to consider the shooting down of Russian Su-24 as a preventive action not to let the Russian Aerospace Forces expand their operation to Iraq as well.

Ultimately, Turkey will consider this incident, and its policy towards Russia, in general, as well-justified and effective in case if it reserves the possibility of conducting unimpeded military operations of any kind in Syria and Iraq. And to the contrary, Turkey will consider its policy mistaken if suffers significant political and /or military, not only economic losses.

Taking into account the specifics of the eastern mentality, Turkey's military losses should be treated within the same category, as the shot down SU-24. No doubt that it is fraught with a start of a new, more bloody cycle of military confrontation between Turkey and Russia, and most probably it will have an indirect proxy nature without features of intergovernmental conflict. However, it would allow Russia to reestablish itself as a serious actor in the Middle Eastern policy and in the entire Turkic world, who returns to the region once and for all.

In this context, such incidents that occurred in the region not long ago, may be taken as illustration. After the Syrian anti-aircraft forces shot down a Turkish RF-E4 reconnaissance airplane over the Mediterranean, Turkey actually started a hunt for the Syrian military

³*Iraq can request Russia for assistance in struggle against extremists* (in Russian). Radio Svoboda, October 07, 2015. Available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/archive/radio-svoboda-news/32/16564/16564.html?id=27292939>

airplanes and finally managed to shoot down the Syrian MiG-23 in July, 2014.

A similar situation was created, when an Armenian helicopter Mi-24 was shot down in the zone of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in November 12, 2014. The lack of a symmetric response led to a unprecedented growth of the combat spirit in the Azerbaijani armed forces and significant aggravation of the situation in the armed confrontation, which continues up to now. As a result, the total number of losses of the both sides has reached its maximum since signing the cease-fire agreement in May, 1994.

Some concluding remarks

-The Islamic State evolution shows that a terrorist organization with a properly shaped ideology and which uses contradictions between regional and global powers, local confessional and ethnic conflicts, temporary weakening of the central government in any country, is able enough to initiate a rebel war and to completely occupy a part of given country or region.

-Experience in creation and development of the Islamic state, the methods of recruitment and mobilization of both proto-terrorists and followers of the widest civil profile, will be surely demanded and most probably repeated in practice, first of all within the maximal frontiers of the declared "Caliphate."

-Further development of the business project of the Islamist terrorism may be the modeling of military-political instability in any state or region "from zero" with creation of "grey areas," not controlled by central authorities. The main goal is to establish at place such regimes that would pledge allegiance to the IS (or a similar entity that might replace it in the future). Their main task is pumping out raw materials, finances, mobilization and other resources to reinforce the budget of international terrorism. In this case the idea of building up and expanding of the Islamic state will be economically self-sufficient.

By the way, the Iraqi clerical, Sheikh Abu Saad al-Ansari made public the IS budget for 2015 (he did it before the start of Russian air strikes): it was expected to reach \$2 billion, with a 250 million USD surplus. According to him, this money was aimed for the war.⁴

-If earlier international Islamist terrorist organizations were used as tools for destabilization of the situation in any state of the

⁴*The Bandit Caliphate*. Kommersant–Money Journal, Moscow, No.36, September 14, 2015. Available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/money/90143>

region, with time, having accumulated necessary funds, as well as material, intellectual, and mobilization resources, they acquire the capability of choosing by themselves a territory not only for a formal proclamation of a new "province of the Caliphate," but also to impose a real quasi-state entity there.

-It is necessary to analyze the experience of some states, which are forcing away their extremist citizens – supporters of the Islamic State, to the areas of an open armed conflict (especially with families and closest relatives) and ruling out their return with already obtained skills for sabotage, terrorist, or rebel activity.

-Along with losing its image as an effective state, and especially after the military defeat in Syria, the IS would be forced to redistribute the geography and intensity of its rebel activity. In this situation Turkey would be provided with a good opportunity to become something like a "dispatcher" for a part of "free radicals" of the Islamist terrorism, as it was with the Saudi Arabia when Taliban occupied Afghanistan in 1990s. The main directions of "channeling" their flows are the areas of its strategic interests with high conflict potential, especially if there is already an armed conflict or it is an object of intensive terrorist activity. First of all, it is the south-east of Ukraine, Northern Caucasus, Xinjiang-Uygur autonomous region of China, and in case of resumption of hostilities, the area of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict as well. The IS potential has not yet been exhausted in the region, populated by Turkomans, either; on the crossroad of special interest for Shiites and Sunnites; Kurds, Arabs and Turks; Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran.

-Turkey has thoroughly studied the impact of migrants' flood from the area of the Syrian conflict on the situation in the European countries. One cannot exclude that the accumulated experience and techniques for initiation of such problem would be used by Ankara against labor migrants from Armenia in Turkey in case of aggravation of its relations with Yerevan by any reasons (for example, due to escalation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict). It is worth mentioning the threats, voiced earlier by R.T. Erdoğan and other Turkish officials. In particular, in his interview to BBC on March 16, 2010, Erdoğan, then Prime-Minister of Turkey, said that, "if required," Ankara could deport nearly 100.000 Armenians, illegally working in Turkey.⁵

⁵*Reactions to the statement of Recep Tayyep Erdoğan on the possible deportation of Armenians.* International radio of France, March 21, 2010. Available at: http://www1.rfi.fr/acturu/articles/123/article_5804.asp

Experience of the Islamic State in Syria shows, that a terrorist organization, capable of launching a long-term rebel war, will most probably become one of the main tools for undermining stability in any given state along with other "velvet" technologies. But it will have much greater potential for changing the balance of forces in the entire region, and with its activities it is able to trigger a serious political crisis, engaging other states into armed conflict.