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The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: who will stop Islamic fundamentalism



Over the last two years, the phenomenon known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has become one of the most influential factors of international politics. ISIL is now regarded by the US and its European and Asian allies as the biggest threat to stability and security not only in the Middle East, but also beyond. ISIL is perceived as a far more complex and serious threat than Al-Qaeda, or the former authoritarian regimes in Iraq and Libya or the current authoritarian government in Syria. At the same time, in Ukraine, the issue of ISIL remains on the foreign policy sidelines, despite the fact that in the context of contemporary geopolitical security issues, ISIL should have been a greater focus of attention for Ukrainian foreign affairs experts.

The origins of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant can be traced back to the civil war in Iraq, which was triggered by the military campaign of the US and its allies against the Saddam Hussein regime. In the chaos

of 2004, the most influential militant Jihadist group, Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, joined Al-Qaeda as a local branch of the most infamous terrorist organization in the world. Two years later, a terrorist organization named the Islamic State of Iraq was created, which became known as al-Qaeda in Iraq. A number of successful American military operations as well as interethnic conflicts in the region dealt a shattering blow to the Islamic State of Iraq. However, Sunni sheikhs managed to save it from complete destruction given that they hoped to use Islamic fundamentalists against attempts by the Shiite-controlled Nouri al-Maliki government to seize power.

Two events that took place in 2011 reanimated the Islamic State of Iraq. The first event was the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and al-Maliki's simultaneous inclination towards an increasingly authoritarian style of rule. The other event was the outbreak of a civil war in neighboring Syria, which breathed new life into the Jihadist group. The incessant escalation of hostilities in Syria and the further destabilization of Iraq led to the emergence of

a fundamentalist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in 2013, which removed “al-Qaeda” from its official name due to ideological differences between the two organizations.

In June 2014, ISIL militants took over large swathes of northern Iraq and Syria and proclaimed the creation of a caliphate. Since then, the activity of ISIL has become one of the foremost global security challenges and has led to the formation of a rather motley coalition of states comprising countries such as the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and others. A terrorist act in the city of Suluk, which is situated close to Syria’s border with Turkey, on July 20 and the murder of police officers on July 23, 2015, prompted Turkey to engage more actively in countering the threat of ISIL.

ISIL potential

ISIL has become the main security challenge to countries of the Middle East. As of today, ISIL is the most powerful terrorist organization in the world. Its potential relies on the following components:

- 1) Geographical: ISIL covers a large territory in the very heart of the Middle East at the crossroads of the continental routes between Asia, Europe and Africa;
- 2) Demographic: The group is comprised of some Sunni tribes in Iraq, marginalized by the Shiite government, some Sunni radical groups in Syria, a number of Iraqi servicemen, members of the Ba’ath Party (the ruling party in Iraq during Saddam Hussein’s rule), jihadists from other Middle Eastern countries, as well as representatives of Europe’s Muslim community who failed to adapt to host societies;
- 3) Military: ISIL has taken advantage of warehouses with arms and military hardware, left behind by the Syrian and Iraqi government forces, as well as the uncontrolled flows of arms after the Arab Spring, which was accompanied by the militarization of the region;
- 4) Economic: ISIL raises revenues from the sale of oil extracted on the seized northern territories of Iraq and Syria, the sale of movable and immovable property, customs duties and human trafficking. The group also receives some funding from various sheikhs and banks in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey;
- 5) Organizational: Unlike states and international organizations, the absence of bureaucratic

apparatus allows terrorist groups to act faster and make decisions more effectively in a short time span. At the same time, al-Qaeda and the majority of other fundamentalist groups in Pakistan, the Maghreb, the Arabian peninsula and Southeast Asia do not support ISIL for, among other things, ideological differences, asymmetrical potential and their disapproval of the group’s excessively brutal imposition of sharia law;

- 6) Informational: ISIL makes use of popular communication channels (Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) as well as propaganda machines and public demonstrations of violence.

Key players’ interests

ISIL has gained top priority on the international agenda in view of the geographic nature of the ISIL threat. ISIL militants are the biggest destabilizing factor in the Middle East, a particularly vulnerable part of the world, touching interests of both traditional players in the region and global international actors. In addition to posing a threat to national and global security, ISIL is also the source of some threats, including terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, contraband trade in arms and oil and trafficking in humans.

ISIL activities have prompted even bitter rivals to begin a dialogue. In particular, one of the factors contributing to the Iran nuclear deal made between Iran and six other states (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the US, Russia and China) was the threat of ISIL over the interests of both Washington and Tehran. Nevertheless, all those involved in the global fight against ISIL are pursuing their own foreign policy goals.

The international coalition formed to fight ISIL includes both Western (the US, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Poland) and Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan). Iran has not entered the coalition; however, Iran runs special operations against ISIL, thus helping the Shiite government in Syria and the fragile al-Assad’s regime in their fight against ISIL militants.

Among foreign policy threats, ISIL is threat number one for the US and its allies, shifting the Ukrainian-Russian confrontation towards a secondary consideration on their international agenda. In combating ISIL, Barack Obama’s

administration focuses on the creation of a new balance of power and targeted military operations with a limited use of force.

Iran provides determined military and financial assistance to Shiite groups and Baghdad's central government, seeking to keep Iraq within its sphere of influence. Although Tehran approves of US airstrikes against ISIL positions in Iraq, it objects to Washington's involvement in Syria. Iran is not interested in complete liquidation of the Syrian part of ISIL as it hopes to use it against the Syrian opposition.

Despite the confessional affinity between Saudi Arabia and ISIL, Riyadh fears uncontrolled Sunni radicals. Saudis compete with ISIL and al-Qaeda for Salafist ideas in the region. In turn, Saudi Arabia is seeking to incite ISIL and the government forces of Iraq and Syria to fight each other in order to neutralize Iran's influence on Saudi Arabia's northern neighbors. Saudi assistance is also provided to those Sunni groups in Iraq and Syria that oppose ISIL.

A threat to Turkey's national security

Over the last decade, Turkey has acquired the status of a regional power. Turkey's multi-vector foreign policy with its "zero problems with the neighbors" concept, pursued by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ahmet Davutoğlu since 2011, made Turkey establish pragmatic relations with Russia, China and influential Middle Eastern states, oppose sanctions against Iran, pursue an active policy in Balkans, express support for Palestine and maintain good-neighborly relations with Georgia and "football" diplomacy with Armenia. At the same time, Turkey's foreign policy was marked by a tactical departure from the main foreign policy goal – EU membership, increasing frictions with the US on a variety of issues, the "Islamization" of Turkey's foreign policy and the rapid deterioration of Turkish-Israeli relations.

However, during 2011-2014, the security environment of Turkey dramatically changed, which not only complicated the fulfillment of Turkey's regional ambitions but also created challenges to the national security of the country. Recently Turkey has found itself between three zones of turbulence: the EU financial crisis on its western flank, caused by the situation in Turkey's former antagonist – Greece; confrontation on the Black Sea as a result of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict on its northern flank; and ISIL

activity in Turkey's war-torn neighbors on its southern flank.

The biggest threat to Turkey's national security comes from Syria and Iraq. The issue of the Kurds has been one of the main factors determining Ankara's policy towards its southern neighbors. After Baghdad and Damascus lost control over the situation in their northern regions, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds created a number of military units. Now Ankara fears the expansion of Kurdish separatism into the southeastern regions of Turkey.

After the outbreak of a civil war in Syria, Turkey turned away from Bashar al-Assad to actively support the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other moderate Islamist groups. When ISIL stepped up its activities against the backdrop of the chaos in Syria, Turkey still delayed joining the international US-led coalition against ISIL. There were several important reasons for Turkey's wait-and-see tactics. First, ISIL's fight against the al-Assad regime and the Syrian Kurds corresponded to Ankara's interests. Second, Turkey learned from other countries' experiences in how dearly intervention into a Middle Eastern country could cost. Third, interfering directly in an Arab country's internal affairs could undermine Arab countries' trust in Turkey, which already accuse Turkey of "neosmanism".

However, a number of events that unfolded in July 2015 showed Turkey that its wait-and-see policy towards Syria and Iraq was not paying off. In view of the existence of a direct threat to Turkey, Erdoğan turned to a high risk strategy. As a result, Turkey entered the international coalition against the ISIL and agreed with the US to coordinate common actions in this regard. The US was granted permission to use the Incirlik Air Base for operations against ISIL.

The fight against ISIL led to the political rapprochement between Turkey and the US. However, with the US and other NATO member states hoping to use Turkish air forces against ISIL's positions in Iraq and Syria, such rapprochement allowed Ankara to target members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, who often launch attacks on Turkish security forces. It is likely that Turkey's intervention will be limited only to the use of its air force against ISIL. Ankara is seeking to create a safety zone in northern regions of Syria and Iraq in order to safeguard the southern

frontiers against Kurdish militant groups and ISIL fighters.

What next?

Under intense international military pressure, the fate of al-Qaeda may next befall ISIL. The likelihood of such a scenario is proved by several military, security, political, economic and ideological reasons. At the same time, there are serious fears that the state of international affairs in 2015 has changed drastically since the US and its allies eliminated Osama bin Laden and his supporters 10 years ago. Today, ISIL is largely a symbol of protest and an alternative to the current world order, created after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which proved to be fragile and unable to offer a healthy and appealing alternative to those who were not born in the “golden billion” countries.

In EU countries, groups loyal to ISIL ideas and values have strengthened their positions. Despite suffering serious air strikes, ISIL demonstrates a great vitality thanks to the fanatic beliefs and loyalty of its followers. The West is divided; the US under the weakest president in recent American history is no longer capable of playing the role of a global leader in facing new challenges, whether it is climate change, the global economic crisis, Russian aggression or the threat of ISIL. These and many other arguments give radical Islamists a chance to change the configuration of powers on the geopolitical chessboard - first in the Middle East and later in North Africa or Afghanistan. It is yet unclear how far radical Islamists will go in their readiness to sacrifice their own lives as well as the lives of others in the name of Allah.

The aim of the publication is to provide analysis of Ukraine's foreign policy in the context of global processes in the region and the world, as well as an overview of major world events that may have an impact on the further development of Ukraine and the region. Special attention is paid to the European integration of Ukraine, in particular implementation of Ukraine–EU Association Agreement.

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