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CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA AND COUNTER-TERRORIST OPERATION OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Abstract: This article views the reasons of emergence and development of civil war in Syria, and also the main political actors counteracting each other. The purposes and objectives of a counter-terrorist operation of the Russian Federation in Syria are analysed. The main contradictions and problems between Russia and the USA, the European countries, and also the states of the Persian Gulf on settlement of the Syrian conflict are shown. The special attention is paid to the analysis of risks and costs of the counter-terrorist operation which is carried out by Russia. Formats of negotiation process on settlement of the Syrian conflict are considered.

Key words: Civil war, Syria, terrorism, "Islamic State", counter-terrorist operation, Russian Federation, political conflict, settlement of conflict.

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The civil war in Syria is a series of antigovernmental strikes, mass disorders in various cities of Syria aimed against authority of the country President B. al-Assad, which overgrew into an armed stand-off between the government forces and soldiers of the Syrian opposition in June-July of 2011. There are quite many reasons of political conflict in Syria. Record drought came down on Syria and lasted from 2006 to 2011. It affected about 60% of lands. Waste of natural resources caused shortage of water and failure of 75% of crop. According to UN in 2010 about 1 million people lost their means of living as a result of the drought. Absence of balanced social policy and high level of unemployment (about 20% at the moment of conflict start) promoted crisis phenomena in social and economic sphere.

One cannot deny the fact that social protests of 2011 were warmed up by successful performances of oppositions in neighbouring countries. Events of "the Arab spring" had major effect on various social groups of population, especially on the youth. There were old chronic problems in Syria, such as the citizens' dissatisfaction by political system and authoritarian rule of B. al-Assad, domination of Alawites in government bodies, corruption in state authorities etc [1, p. 51]. Antigovernmental strikes received major (firstly informational and financial) support from specific countries of the world (the

USA, European countries, countries of the Persian Gulf), studying own interests in Syria. Demands of social equity gradually started to unite such ethno-confessional group as Kurds, Alawites, Sunnites, Christians.

Certainly one cannot but note the existing latent religious cleavage (between Shiites and Sunnites), and ethnic conflicts (for example, the problem of Kurds in the north of the country). As a result of the current situation not tens, but hundreds of thousands of protestants went out on the streets in the spring and summer of 2011 [2]. Law enforcement bodies could not restrain them for long, and applied military operations against the opposition. Massive opposition forces, and later their armed wing - the Free Syrian Army were formed as a response to such actions.

Confrontation between the Syrian government and the opposition gradually grew out into a full-scale civil war. In November of 2012 various opposition forces declared establishment of the Syrian National Coalition with the headquarters in the city of Doha (Qatar) [3, p. 137]. The aim of this coalition was to unify all the fractions acting against the President of Syria B. al-Assad and for his overthrow. The opposition groups stand off the legal Syrian government, supported by the Lebanese organization "Khezbollah" and the Iraqi Shiite



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military groups, and later by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as well. However the ranks of the Syrian National Coalition turned out insufficiently unified and already in January of 2013 soldiers of "Al-Nusra Front" group declared desire to form the Islamic State based on Sharia law. Their withdrawal from the coalition caused negative reaction of the other opposition groups, that declared possible confrontation with the radical Islamists. The later formed own military alliance, comprised of a series of Islamist organizations committed to extremist methods of struggle, which was later transformed into the terrorist organization "the Islamic State".

Since 2011 and up to the present day the territory of Syria is a ground of confrontation of separate military groups and forces accompanied by deaths of people and decrease of economics. Over 4 million citizens of the country departed from Syria since the beginning of conflict up to the present time. One can single out four major forces opposing to each other. Firstly, it is the Syrian government and army supported by Russia and its air and space forces, localized strikes whereof contributed to breakout operation of the armed forces of Syria. Secondly, it is the opposition represented by the Syrian National Coalition, with which political dialogue is planned to be held in the future on regulation of the Syrian conflict. Thirdly, it is "the Islamic State" consisting of various radical Islamist organizations, also including Al-Qaeda, and controlling the rest of territory of Syria. Fourthly, it is the Kurdish population living in the north of the country and striving for establishment of own state. Quite serious confrontation is developing among these forces, however all of them, except for "the Islamic State", see no alternative to negotiations as means of solution of the Syrian conflict.

Counter-terrorist operation of Russia on countermeasures against activity of "the Islamic State" in Syria was started on September 30, 2015. This is not a land operation, actions of the country's air and space forces aimed at destruction of infrastructure facilities of the terrorist organization, which will promote further settlement of the Syrian conflict. According to the General Staff of Armed Forces of the Russian Federation 1623 surface facilities of infrastructure were destroyed during a month that passed from the beginning of the military operation. War planes took 1391 operational flight resulting in destructed command posts and communication centers, terrorist training camps, plants and works of explosives production, warehouses of ammunition and fuel, field camps, support points and military bases [4]. As a result of these actions of Russia performed upon the request of the President of Syria Bashar al-Assad, serious damage was caused to the terrorist organization "the

Islamic State" and the Syrian army passed to vast offensive.

Right from the beginning of the military operation actions of Russia drew criticism on behalf of specific countries of the world, such as the USA, the United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar etc. Russia was blamed for hopelessness of the military operation, aggravation of the Syrian conflict, support of non-legitimate government of B. al-Assad, creation of threats to security of the neighbouring countries. Some expressed opinions that Russia's intervention into the Syrian conflict will lead to negative consequences for the national economy and social-political stability, increase of the terrorist activity in the Caucasus. In my opinion, it is quite explainable. The countries comprising the coalition on struggle against "the Islamic State" and "headed" by the USA, originally had purposes different from those pursued by Russia. They consider the regime of B. al-Assad to be non-legitimate, call for his resignation and holding of democratic elections. Herewith, holding of democratic elections will be at least ineffective at the present time. It can lead to complete loss of control over the country, developing of the terrorist threat and Syria's turning into "the failed state". One can easily see behind it all a more important purpose of the USA aimed at establishment of a regime in Syria which will be loyal to the American state, maybe it will be unstable, but under control [5, p. 91-92].

It should be noticed that the anti-Syrian campaign on weakening of the regime of B. al-Assad was started soon after completion of the active stage of military actions of the USA and its allied members in Iraq, logical consequence of this campaign was support of the so-called "peaceful" demonstrations of the spring of 2011, which quickly grew into armed conflicts with engagement of the international terrorism forces. It can be considered that the USA originally pursued the aim "to isolate" and maximally weaken own opponents in the region, Syria and Iran, and thus Russia that has significant power in these countries.

In general, it should be noted that the USA and its Western allied members have major experience of using radical Islamist organizations in the struggle against own geopolitical and regional opponents. This experience was first successfully applied in Afghanistan for fighting against the Soviet intervention and then in Yugoslavia and the Middle East countries. We can mention some efforts of using it in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus region. Support of the Islamic fundamentalism was performed in cooperation with the countries pursuing alike goals, and organizational, financial, material and logistic support was provided by special services.

Such support is nowadays provided in the territory of Syria. According to the Russian

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parliament delegation that visited Damascus and other regions of the country in May of 2015, from 500 to 1000 of soldiers passed to Syria across the Turkish territory every day. Soldiers are enrolled, organizations financing "the Islamic State" function in Turkey. In my opinion, such actions could be hardly possible if the Turkish government established severe control over such activity. Besides, the USA, some European countries and Turkey also actively declare support of the so-called moderate Syrian opposition, but actions of some of members of this opposition differ little from the actions of the radical Islamist organizations comprising "the Islamic State". That is why positions of some Western countries are not surprising, they want to know why military groups of the opposition fall under strikes of the Russian air and space forces.

Striving for active use of the Islamic factor strengthens political ambitions and impact of radical organizations adhering to the relevant principles. Inculcation of totalitarian world view instead of traditional religious ideas will promote fragmentation of the Syrian society, but not its consolidation. Vast political dialogue is necessary with engagement of all the conflict parties (except for terrorist organizations) and some world powers.

The Russian policy takes the line on formation of broad international coalition aimed at struggle against "the Islamic State", but faces no understanding of the Western partners, supporting the opposition. Day by day there appear more and more documentary evidences of assistance by the USA and its allied members rendered to the Islamist organizations. In confirmation we can cite the President of Russia V. Putin who gave a speech at Valdai International Discussion Club and touched on the theme of international terrorism supported by the West: "It never ceases to amaze me how our partners have been guilty of making the same mistakes time and again. They have in the past sponsored Islamic extremists who were battling against the Soviet Union, which took place in Afghanistan. It was because of this the Taliban and Al-Qaeda was created. The West if not supported, at least closed its eyes, and, I would say, gave information, political and financial support to international terrorists' invasion of Russia (we have not forgotten this) and the Central Asian region's countries" [6].

Russia' activity on countermeasures against the international terrorism is aimed at its forestalling not only in the Middle East countries, but also in the territory of the Russian Federation and CIS countries. From the beginning of the Russian counter-terrorist operation there appeared tough declarations about expansion of terrorism threat to the territory of the Russian state, overthrow of the existing regime and commencement of Jihad against the Russian soldiers. However these statements are far from any implementation. At the same time, it would be a

mistake to underestimate the threat of terror transition to the Russian Federation.

Recently about 2400 citizens of Russia fight on the side of "the Islamic State". There is a threat of commitment of terrorist attacks in some regions of the North Caucasus, Volga region and in the capital of the country. Escape of gunmen from Syria after the start of the military operation of the Russian air and space forces and breakout of the Syrian army can cause return of some terrorists to Russia. There are facts of arrest of people accessory to the activity of the terrorist organization "the Islamic State" already known in some regions of Russia, including Moscow. Weapon, explosives and communication devices were found in the course of searching of their apartments. It should be noted that representatives of the so-called "Crimean Jamaat" also fight on the side of terrorists in Syria, a part of this Jamaat takes part in military actions in Donbas. Therefore there is a risk of transfer of the Ukrainian weapon to the gunmen of "the Islamic State".

The work on detection of the members of the radical Islamist organizations should never be stopped. They can come into Russia as refugees. That is why citizens coming to the country from Syria must be checked with due attention.

Another equally important task of Russia in Syria is support of statehood in the form of consolidation of power of the country President and retention of Syria as a state. We should clarify two aspects when talking about this task. The first one is connected with the fact that support of the President B. al-Assad can be temporary, but Russia will also strive for retention of own political and military leverage in Syria after the conflict settlement [7, p. 347]. According to the results of the meeting of the Contact Group on Syria which took place in Vienna on October 30, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the USA, Russia, EU, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Middle East countries and Iran agreed upon formation of the transition government in Syria after completion of the military operations in the country. The issue of further staying in power of B. al-Assad was omitted, the parties came to agreement that it is necessary to reserve this regime, at least, until formation of the transit government, which will be elected by the Syrian nation.

The second aspect, being the logical consequence of the first one, is related to singling out the radical and the moderate opposition, for the further consolidation of the later and turning into a major member of the future negotiation process. Russia considers it right to single out nationally oriented structures in the opposition that strive for attainment of power in Syria and achievement of national consensus in the country. Those must be structures enjoying prominent confidence of the country population.

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As for support of the statehood, it should be mentioned that formation of the steady political system requires the Russian military operation to be supported by actions aimed at strengthening of state institutes and reintegration of the country [8]. Nowadays situation in Syria is close to development of statehood under the Lebanese scenario, when there are several administrative-territorial entities in the country, which do not subordinate to each other and have own military formations. The current situation will not satisfy other world powers that are not interested in formation of de facto states in the territory of Syria. The only way out is decentralization of Syria with relevant assignment of autonomies to own regions and sharing responsibility for support of such system with regional and world powers.

The counter-terrorist operations of Russia held in Syria promotes solution of another equally important task which is the support of own international image and strengthening of own power at the global stage. Russia holds itself out as a world power at various international sites, worthy of the role of one of the centers of a multipolar world. In this case the Syrian crisis can become one more important step of transition of the Russian foreign policy from regional to the world and initiative one [9]. Certainly, Russia could have interfered with the Syrian conflict without special agreements with the Western countries and major regional powers and pursue own interest to the maximum extent, considering all possible risks and restrictions. Such strategy of actions was held by the USA and its allied members, who held military campaigns in the territory of the former Yugoslavia, in Iraq, Lebanon. Russia selected a more constructive position, having at once declared that it struggles against such "world evil" as terrorism, and its actions are aimed at settlement of conflict, offering all the interested states for this works.

Notwithstanding all the criticism towards Russia, the Western countries were forced to accept its military involvement into the Syrian conflict and take it as a serious political player in the region, that must be taken into account. The Syrian campaign is a serious Russian initiative aimed at settlement of one of the world problems. Herewith one should mention that this operation does not contradict the USA and its Western allied members, but is in partnership with them and on absolutely legal grounds within the applicable international law. If Russia manages to defend own interests successfully and settle the conflict, to provide order and peaceful post-conflict recovery of the state, it will affirm own status of the great world power. This will significantly raise its authority, its interests and the sphere of influence will be respected in the world, Russia will prove own ability to solve important regional and world problems.

Russia's commitment in Syria is proved not only by statements of representatives of the Russian authorities, but by actual agreements under the conflict. Communique of nine provisions was adopted according to results of negotiations the Contact Group on Syria on October 30 in Vienna. They reflect ideas earlier declared by Russia as well as positions of the other parties involved in the conflict [10]. One can say that negotiations held in Vienna represent the first full-fledged international format on settlement of conflict in Syria, which became possible mostly thanks to diplomatic efforts of Russia and the ongoing counter terrorist operation. The meeting was attended by representatives of 19 delegations from various countries of the world and organizations (UN), its theme was the new launch of the process of political dialogue in Syria. The signed communique is a specific map of further actions of participants of negotiations, however there is no guarantee that some countries that signed under the principles of this document, will follow it. The countries of the Persian Gulf acting against the regime of B. al-Assad were dissatisfied by the adopted document, which in their opinion does not reflect actual discrepancies between the participants of negotiations. But it is a very important step, qualitative replenishment whereof will promote the conflict settlement in the future.

Along the aforementioned important conditions of solving of the Syrian problem in Vienna there was an agreement achieved on necessity of formation of the Syrian delegation from the opposition, which will be arranged by the special UN bodies, and execution of additional lists of terrorist organizations besides those already recognized by the UN, which will be under military strikes. In our opinion, it will allow to single out the moderate opposition from the radical one. Importance of consecutive cease-fire between the conflict parties was declared, but the terms and conditions of cease fire were not specified (except for the fact that this will not apply to terrorist groups and struggle against them). The issue of humanitarian assistance to those in need in Syria and refugees was also discussed at negotiations.

It is important to note participation of Iran in the negotiations within settlement of the Syrian conflict. It will allow to balance the existing format of the negotiation process. Iran shares Russia's position on Syria and coordinates own actions with it. For efficient completion of the military operation in Russia it is necessary to support political and economic relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which are the Sunnite states, and seek for compromise on the Syrian conflict. Russia considers it important to avoid perception of own policy as the one aimed at support of the Shiite countries, which can lead to confrontation between the members of negotiations process as per internal confessional aspect (Shiites - Sunnites) and dangerous internal

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consequences for Russia itself. The Russian Federation finds it necessary to make it clear that its involvement is of purpose character aimed at provision of own security and security in the region, at its stabilization. Otherwise it can promote loss of confidence to Russia as to an important and responsible participant in solving of various Middle East conflicts and crises.

It should be noted that counter-terrorist operation of Russia in Syria is a quite elaborate foreign policy step. Russia strives not only to raise the level of own international influence, but to prevent the threat of intrusion of radical extremist organizations to own territory. Therefore one can agree with the opinion of the President of Russia V. Putin, saying that the country's "line of struggle" against the international terrorism goes not along the borders of Russia and not along Tadjik-Afghan border, but in Syria, where from five to seven thousand citizens of Russia and CIS countries are fighting on the side of "the Islamic State" and other terrorist organizations.

Thus, today the counter-terrorist operation of Russia is necessary and enjoys support of a number of the countries of the region. Its further efficiency will depend on ability of the Russian diplomacy to find effective formats of interaction and to resolve the existing contradictions between other participants

of negotiation process. Certainly, on this way the set of problems will meet. Government of Syria and ill-matched opposition difficult partners in itself. Instruments of influence on them from Russia and the USA aren't always effective. For Russia important that its position wasn't associated with inflexibility of the Syrian government and unwillingness to go on any compromises.

Despite all criticism of the USA and their western allies of the Russian military operation, as a result of actions of aerospace forces of the country the Syrian army could take from defense to offensive. Certainly, there are big risks of actions and the USA, and Russia in the Syrian conflict. For Russia sees important not to allow penetration of terrorist groups on the territory of the country, especially to the region of the North Caucasus. Essential it is represented to count all possible risks and costs in military and political and diplomatic spheres from participation in the Syrian conflict. Further efficiency of operation of Russia in Syria will depend on ability to build constructive dialogue between the parties of the conflict in Syria and to promote further post-conflict restoration in the country.

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