

Confidential

RUSSIA

The circulation of this report has been strictly limited to the members of the
Trialogue Club International
and of the Centre russe d'études politiques.

This issue is for your personal use only.

Published monthly in Russian and in English
by Trialogue Company Ltd.

Issue № 11 (227), vol.14. November 2015

December 16, 2015

Dmitry Evstafiev reports from Moscow:

CONFRONTATION OF EXTERNAL FORCES IN SYRIAN CONFLICT:

CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION AND THE ROLE OF RUSSIA

SUMMARY

With Russia's air campaign aimed at undermining the economic base of the "Islamic State" (IS) gaining momentum in Syria, the internal sources of Syrian conflict and the scope of territories it affected decreased significantly. There is also reduction in number of active forces interested in maintaining "controlled chaos" in this geopolitically vital region. However, as argued by political analyst Dmitry Evstafiev, professor of the Higher School of Economics and member of the PIR Center Executive Board, Syria continues to be territory of "proxy war" for Russia, the U.S. and other countries. In circumstances where decisions to participate in Syrian conflict take a form of a "chain reaction", the option of controlled escalation of confrontation between external forces in the region cannot be ruled out, the analyst believes.

Assessing strategies and objectives of Russia's participation in the conflict, the expert assumes that Moscow's priority task is consolidating the territory controlled by Damascus, but thorough restructuring of Syrian statehood is an acceptable option as well. Pointing out the uncertainty of the future framework for a political settlement in Syria and deep internal problems in the region, Dmitry Evstafiev critically estimates its chances for a strong military and political stabilization and social and economic modernization needed for that.

This issue of "Russia Confidential" explains why Syrian conflict is doomed to exacerbate militarily and politically; what are the impending difficulties of "transition"; why it is so important to be a leader in defeating the IS; and how is that a "smoldering" military conflict in the region may be more favorable for its external parties than a real attempt to stabilize the situation.

HEADING TOWARDS POLITICAL SETTLEMENT: A COURSE ON STRUGGLE FOR TERRITORY

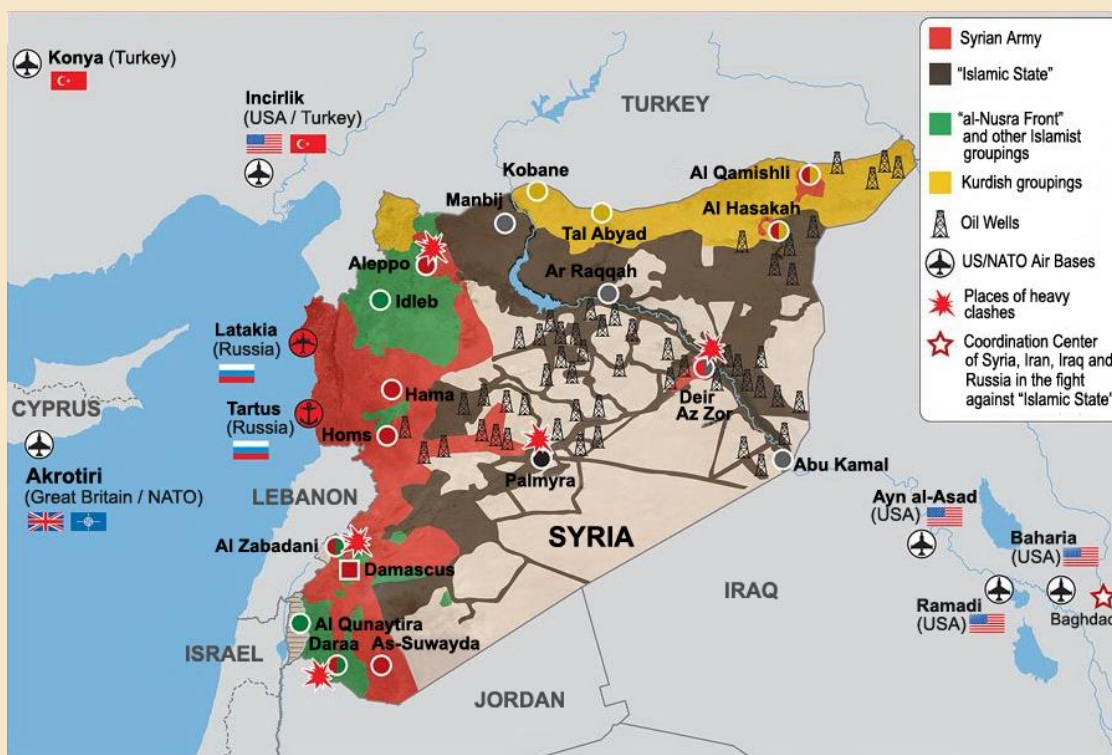
Due to Russia's successful military operation in Syria, liberation of Palmyra (Tadmor) by Bashar al-Assad forces seems practically imminent today. This will restore the land corridor to Deir az-Zor, providing government troops access both to the southern borders of Syria (in the zone adjacent to Deraa and in the province of Quneitra) and to its north (Turcoman regions and the city of Jisr al-Shukur). This, in turn, will not just mean a military turning point in the Syrian conflict. This will bring the line when purely military instruments will cease to play a dominant role, with re-establishment of political institutions and building a new system of government becoming priority.

And this is where considerable difficulties are likely to arise.

The problem lies in the lack of even a rough understanding of the future framework for a political settlement in Syria. Failure to form a unified anti-terrorist coalition has led to no clarity regarding the list of members of the future *transitional period* (if there will be such, in principle), nor even concerning the broad outlines of the structure of the Syrian government. Besides, Russia – being a de facto leader of the anti-terrorist coalition – could demonstrate leadership here as well: thanks to the currently highest level of trust between Damascus and Moscow it is unlikely that Assad government will seriously oppose the active role of Russia in this issue.

This means that political construction will also be confrontational and will not be based on an attempt to reach consensus of the main political forces (rather controlled than "moderate"), but on a desire to exchange control of the territory for political and economic influence. The level of policy institutionalization in Syria is just too weak for other scenarios.

In general, we can confidently expect that the activity of the various parties to the conflict in ground operations will increase significantly in the coming weeks, where a transition will begin from the attempts to control logistics to struggle for territory. Key among them, especially in terms of Russia's participation in Syrian conflict, is *Idlib* exclave of radical Islamists and the territory of Raqqah province.



Military Map of Syria: Disposition of Opposing Forces. Source: Vzglyad.

- Without removing **Idlib exclave** it is impossible to fully restore connectivity (i.e., administrative and economic unity) of the territory controlled by Assad government. With a large and potentially self-sustaining *Idlib exclave* in place, the government's ability to impose its political will on other parties to the future negotiation process will be severely limited. On the contrary, if the exclave will be eliminated or at least cut into several smaller *boilers*, the political position of Assad government will be extremely strong, almost dominant. Military chances for such development do exist, but it will probably necessitate more active participation of Russia in the conflict.
- The province of **Raqqa** is important not only and not exactly as a place proclaimed as *IS* citadel, but also as logistically and economically vital territory. After its loss, the *IS* and radical Islamists in general will almost certainly lose the ability for system performance and will turn into ordinary fighters with inefficient central command and sporadic funding.

FROM AL-NUSRA'S TO IS' LEGACY DIVISION: A COURSE ON ESCALATION

Thus, in the short term the situation will inevitably escalate both in political and military-political terms.

Now we can mainly see the fight around *al-Nusra** legacy division, with Bashar al-Assad and his allies currently gaining the upper hand with strong support of Russia. The next step will obviously be a struggle for the *IS* legacy, where Damascus chances for victory are not so unconditional, unless military activity of both Syrian Arab Army and Russian aerospace forces will be strengthened drastically. Some signs of this began to appear in the beginning of December.

Leadership in defeating the *IS* is important for the following reasons:

- *Defeating the IS and occupying strategic territories controlled by the organization will give access to the key area in terms of the subsequent management of all power and economic processes in the Middle East.*
- *Removing the "IS legacy" will mean the end of the Syrian conflict as it is conceived of on the world political arena and as it is perceived by the world community. That is precisely the issue of the IS defeat that will determine the "main winner" - with stabilization in Syria and Iraq remaining very far away though.*
- *"The IS legacy" contains a significant economic component; completely destroying it during the air campaign would be senseless, as it will hinder subsequent recovery of both Syria and the whole region. The force that will be able to control the economic legacy of the IS will receive significant benefits in the period of reconstruction.*

Who, how, how quickly and in what form will decide on the status of the territories inhabited by **Kurds** will also depend on who will be the leader in the *IS* legacy dismantlement. While before the deterioration of Russian-Turkish relations, the likelihood of any formal institutionalization of the Kurdish autonomy was low, now the question cannot be answered so straightforward. This poses significant challenges for all participants in the power struggle / interactions.

In general, the chances of supporters and allies of Bashar al-Assad to be the first in taking Raqqa, which will symbolize the victory over the *IS*, are slightly lower than those of pro-American coalition involving Kurds. This means that the moral superiority, quite critical in the Middle East, may be gained not by Damascus and Moscow in the endgame of the conflict. Of course, the factor of image is not crucial for the Russian policy in the region. Much greater priority is attached to a more

* *al-Nusra Front* - the Syrian branch of terrorist organization *al-Qaeda* (prohibited in Russia).

feasible task of consolidating the territory currently controlled by Damascus. Deep restructuring of the Syrian state, not necessarily preserving Syria's initial borders is principally acceptable for Russia - despite all formal political statements. However, in terms of strengthening its foreign policy image, it would be advisable for Moscow making it sure to obtain the status of the winner over the *IS*. This would give it the opportunity to interact more confidently not only with opponents (primarily the U.S.), but also with allies having their own interests in Syria, which are somewhat different from those of Russia.

EXTERNAL FORCES IN SYRIAN CONFLICT: A COURSE ON MILITARY-POLITICAL BARGAINING

No doubt, the biggest loser in this new redistribution of forces will be **Turkey**, and so will be probably **Qatar**, both supporting the most radical groups in the opposition. One has to assume that Russia will continue to intensify military pressure on groups directly or indirectly related to these sponsoring countries and that those will be excluded from the number of active participants in the negotiating process on Syria - even in case of no further destabilization in Russian-Turkish relations.

Still, other participants of the military power processes in Syria opposing both the regime of Bashar al-Assad and Russia in general are likely to become stronger. This means that the military and political bargaining on the fate of not only Syria, but also on what is called *Big Levant* in the geopolitical language, will be conducted primarily with the **United States** and, apparently, with **Saudi Arabia** as hard as in early autumn 2015. Let us recall that then, after the failure of lengthy consultations on initiating the negotiation process in Syria taking Damascus' interests into account, Russia has made decision on its military participation in the conflict.

So even the value of tactical military successes, as well as set-backs will be extremely high in the coming weeks. One can be certain that Western coalition will make every effort to ensure the government forces advancing eastward (especially northeastward) at the slowest pace possible.

Despite political declarations on unity of purpose, Syria, and - to a lesser extent - Iraq (although ambiguous processes are taking place there as well) continue to be territory of "proxy war" for Russia, the U.S. and other countries. In circumstances where decisions to participate in Syrian conflict take a form of a "chain reaction" (France's decision to send its aircraft carrier; the U.S. decision to conduct limited ground operations by its special forces; Russia's probable decision to expand its air campaign; Germany sending its forces; Turkey concentrating its troops on the border), the option of controlled escalation of confrontation between external forces in the region cannot be ruled out.

Thus, one can draw the following **conclusions**:

- First of all, relatively successful conduction of the Russian air campaign, even in the face of strong opposition by its *competing partners*, and direct military confrontation with Turkey, has resulted in Syrian conflict gaining more favorable quality for **Damascus** as Moscow's ally.
- In September 2015, when the Russian participation in Syrian conflict began, the danger of its expansion was very high - especially in the direction of Jordan, Lebanon, and certain regions of Turkey (mainly Kurdistan). Now it became possible to contain the conflict and even to reduce the scope of territories it affected. There is also a significant reduction in number of active forces which are now (in contrast to the situation two years or even one year ago) interested in maintaining "controlled chaos" in this geopolitically vital region. This suggests that the conflict, which has largely domestic roots, was managed and sponsored from outside. With Russia's air campaign aimed at undermining the economic base of the *IS* and Islamist radicals in

general gaining momentum in Syria, the internal sources of Syrian conflict will be further reduced.

Arguably, it is only **Turkey** and **Qatar**, as well as some groups in the American elite remaining among the supporters of *chaos promotion* in the region. Neither the U.S., nor Israel, nor the oil monarchies of the Persian Gulf can be now referred to as sponsors of this process. They are much more interested in bringing the conflict back to a relatively manageable course and limiting the damage that the activities of *IS* and its affiliate structures caused to pro-western forces in the region. Unclear remains the position of Saudi Arabia, which maintains a relatively aggressive rhetoric as regards situation in Syria, however is getting more and more bogged down in internal political issues and the war in Yemen. It appears that Saudi Arabia should still be considered as a potentially destabilizing force in the region.

- As for **Russia**, it has a chance to transform its notable military successes into political standing in the period after the formal defeat of the *IS* and radical Islamists in general. However, it will require from Moscow not just applying a new level of power tools, but also active participation in the re-establishment of political and social institutions in Syria. This is however a much more ambitious goal than the military defeat of radical Islamism and neutralization of its sponsors. To implement it, Russia will need a new level of political relations and mutual understanding with key players in the political process in Syria: Iran, the EU, and probably the United States - if Washington will be able to keep control over its Kurdish allies. In this sense, the time to form a full-fledged anti-terrorist coalition in Syria and Iraq (one should not forget the latter country as a potential hotbed of *returning destabilization*) will come at a stage of tough negotiations on the structure and the main political parameters of the space freed from Islamists.

CHOOSING LONG-TERM COURSE: REAL STABILIZATION OR *SMOLDERING* CONFLICT?

In addition to the will and resources of external actors, there are several significant factors preventing the *chaos* option from being completely removed from the agenda. These are:

- 1) *tremendously large amount of offensive weapons (missiles both received from sponsors and of home-made type) remaining in the hands of non-state actors;*
- 2) *persistence of Neo-Wahabiism ideology that may gain even more tough anti-systemic forms after the military victory over the IS and radical Islamists;*
- 3) *emergence in 2014-2015 of a strong economic base of the conflict integrating many forces and directly or indirectly involving millions of people. Such "inertia of economic interests", which manifestations Russia faced in its relations with Turkey, cannot be overcome only at the political, let alone military level - that will need considerable time of relatively peaceful development;*
- 4) *almost complete destruction of social and socio-political institutions in the region: the lack of accommodating "social landscape" for hundreds of thousands of people, which in the past five or more years were engaged mainly in military affairs.*

Even though significant part of the Middle Eastern modernization potential was *killed* by the conflict with the *IS*, the prospects for its renewal do exist. However, economic - especially industrial - modernization in the region can only be realized if two fundamental conditions are met:

- laying the foundations of the system of collective security and mutual trust excluding or at least reducing the possibility of non-transparent alliances (like Israeli-Turkish, Turkish-Saudi and Syrian-Iranian relations being such for a long time);

- restructuring power systems of the countries in the region to make them more flexible and democratic – otherwise, it will be impossible to exclude future repetition of the events like those of the *Arab Spring*, probably in even more dangerous forms.

Is Middle East ready for that? It is doubtful. One has therefore to proceed from the assumption that the instability in the Middle East will continue for many years to come, and its suppression by purely military and even political-military methods can only produce a limited effect. If it will be possible to liquidate the Syrian hotbed of the conflict, destabilization will most likely appear in a different but neighboring region. At the same time, the relative stabilization of the military situation in Syria and Iraq gives a chance for a deep restructuring of the entire region of the Middle East, but comes up against a lack of political will and archaic political institutions in many critically important countries. This, in turn, creates a logic of the situation where a *smoldering* military conflict gradually burning away the human and military-technical potential of the new wave of Islamism, may turn out to be more beneficial and less costly – especially for external parties to the conflict – than attempting to really stabilize the situation.

Author: Dmitry Evstafiev, Ph.D. in political science, Professor of the National Research University – Higher School of Economics, Member of the PIR Center Executive Board

Editor: Julia Fetisova

(c) Trialogue Club International: trialogue@pircenter.org;
(c) Centre russe d'études politiques: crep@pircenter.org
Moscow – Geneva, December 2015.

Excerpts from the Membership Terms and Conditions at the Trialogue Club International

[...]

3. The rights of the Club members

3.1. Individual club members are entitled to:

3.1.3. Receive a copy of the *Russia Confidential* exclusive analytical newsletter by e-mail in chosen language (English or Russian). According to the Club Terms and Conditions, the transfer of the bulletin to third parties is not allowed.

[...]

3.2. Corporate Club members are entitled to:

3.2.3. Receive two copies of the *Russia Confidential* exclusive analytical newsletter by e-mail in chosen language (English or Russian) or in both languages simultaneously. Share the bulletin with the other representatives of the corporate member. According to the Club Terms and Conditions, the transfer of the bulletin to third parties is not allowed.

[...]

4. The duties of the Club members

4.1. All members of the Club must:

4.1.6. Not to share the *Russia Confidential* analytical newsletter, as well as the Password to the Club section of the PIR Center web-site with individuals and legal entities who are not members of the Club.

[...]

6. Russia Confidential

6.1. The *Russia Confidential* exclusive analytical newsletter is issued by the Trialogue Ltd for the Club members' private use only.

6.2. The newsletter contains exclusive analytical materials on international security, foreign and domestic policy of Russia and the CIS, prepared by the leading experts specially for *Russia Confidential*.

6.3. The newsletter materials are confidential and must not be quoted and transfer to the non-members for at least 30 days since the day of issue.

6.4. 30 days after the day of issue the Trialogue Ltd can remove the exclusive and confidential status of the material, after which in such cases it can be published in other editions and can be used by the Club members for quoting.

6.5. The newsletter is disseminated via e-mail between the Club members once a month in Russian or in English, depending on the choice of the Club member.

6.6. *The Club member can also receive a paper copy of the newsletter in chosen language.*



Dear members of the Trialogue Club International,

We continue 2015 Club season and are glad to **invite you to prolong your membership for 2016 or 2016-2017**, if you have not done so yet.

In 2016, the *Trialogue* Club members will continue to receive our exclusive information on the foreign policy priorities of the Russian Federation, and on current threats and challenges to global security. **Five meetings of the Trialogue Club International** are planned for 2016 (four in Moscow and one abroad); Club members will receive 4 issues of the Security Index quarterly journal in electronic form and 2 issues in print (in 2016 only in Russian), **12 issues of the Russia Confidential exclusive analytics bulletin**, our informational and analytical newsletters.

As before, experts of the *Trialogue* Club International and of its partner organization PIR Center are open to an exchange of views on key international problems.

Fees for the *Trialogue* Club membership since 2016 are as follows:

Period	Individual membership	Corporate membership
01.01.16. – 31.12.16. (1 year)	50 000 rub.	80 000 rub.
01.01.16. – 31.12.17. (2 years)	90 000 rub.	140 000 rub.

We would like to remind you that the corporate membership is based on **"1+1" scheme** when **two representatives** of the organization participate in the work of the Club.

On all questions concerning the *Trialogue* Club International membership, please contact us by the e-mail secretary@trialogue-club.ru or by phone: +7 (985) 764-98-96

Sincerely,

**Chairman,
Trialogue Club
International**

Dmitry Polikanov