UKRAINE – IS AXIS: RELATION OF CONFLICTS IN DONBASS AND SYRIA IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSURANCE OF INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL SECURITY OF RUSSIA

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This paper studies the influence on the issues of international and national security of Russia of the events and phenomena related to active contacts between Ukraine's representatives and the structures of the terrorist organization *Islamic State* in the context of the geopolitical opposition of the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty countries headed by the United States of America. Anti-Russian and anti-European nature of those relations is being proved, including via terrorist methods. Close mutual relation with the anti-Russian activity in connection with armed conflicts in Syria and South-East Ukraine is shown. Facts and trends threatening the safety state of the Russian Federation and the European countries in connection with the destructive nature of the said relation like recruiting and dispatch of combatants and military contractors, arms smuggling, making forged international documents, etc. have been demonstrated.

Keywords: conflict in South-East Ukraine, war in Syria, Islamism, terrorism, netwars.

INTRODUCTION

The instability of political processes in many regions of the contemporary world is caused by the USA's wish to generate a system of international mutual relations having the sole goal to serve the interests of globalists and international financial elite [1]. To seek this goal, a set of actions is implemented regularly to establish control over the planetary space by the US armed forces and their partners from NATO [2]. The inconsistency of political and economic interests and viewpoints on the prospects of forming a new system of international relations causes conflicts both on the global and regional levels. Within this paper, we would like to stress two of them, located closely to each other – the Black and Caspian Sea basins and the Middle East [3]. In that connection, it should be noted that political, economic and cultural processes flowing in those regions are rather interrelated and actions in one region cause response aggression inevitably [4] in the other region, which is especially seen in the so-called conflict zones of those regions, first of all, in Donbass and Syria/Iraq.

METHODOLOGY

The authors have studied both scientific materials and articles by famous European, American, Russian and other mass media which in details highlighted the facts

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and events in connection with the said problem. Using general scientific methods like system analysis and content analysis, we did a research resulting in this paper. The national security issue has regularly been a subject of research by Russian scholars: theoretical issues related to its assurance have been studied [5], as well as methodological issues arising during its study in the context of growing xenophobia [22] and in the context of interethnic relations and the ideological situation in the Russian society [23]. The core concept in this research was the system of views established in the article by the head of American analytical company *Stratfor* George Friedman "Ukraine, Iraq and a Black Sea strategy" which outlines the prospects of the relation between the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and South East Ukraine at that moment (2014), focusing on the above wish of the USA and its allies to establish new borders and new rules for international relations [6].

RESULTS

In connection with growing geopolitical tension in the world after the events in Crimea in 2014 and growing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the American decision-makers faced open opposition to their policy by a few countries at once – first of all, Russia and Iran. They tried to perceive to which extent the circumstances emerging presently may be changed and how to secure the position of the USA and the western political institutions and their influence in those conflict zones and in the related regions. The above mentioned George Friedman in his article "Ukraine, Iraq and a Black Sea strategy" analyzed the circumstances faced by the American policy: "The United States is, at the moment, off balance. It faces challenges in the Syria-Iraq theater as well as challenges in Ukraine. It does not have a clear response to either. It does not know what success in either theater would look like, what resources it is prepared to devote to either, nor whether the consequences of defeat would be manageable" [7]. As noted by Friedman, for the USA at that moment it was most important to create some uniform plan of actions with the main goal to respond to the most significant challenges. Meantime, it should minimize the risks of the American policy solving the American problems by proxy whenever possible. One of the most interesting moments of that plan was the use of the geographical factor – finding a place enabling to act in a several battle grounds simultaneously. Friedman considered the Black Sea such a place as it ensures the operational space enabling the USA and NATO to efficiently response to the threat by both Russia and terrorists of the Islamic State. "When we look at a map, we note that the Black Sea is the geographic organizing principle of these areas. The sea is the southern frontier of Ukraine and European Russia and the Caucasus, where Russian, jihadist and Iranian power converge on the Black Sea. Northern Syria and Iraq are fewer than 650 kilometers (400 miles) from the Black Sea" [7].

Two years have passed since the publication of that article and a lot has happened: the conflict in Ukraine has become positional, two Minsk peace

agreements have been concluded, while in Syria and Iraq the war against the Islamic State has greatly expanded the number of parties and its scale and caused the relations between Russia and the NATO countries to aggravate more [8], first of all, with Turkey being liable for attacking the Russian bomber Su-24 on November 24, 2015, as well as for trading oil with the Islamic State and support of a few Islamic groups in Syria and Iraq. The fighting in the southern theater reached a rather dangerous, *hot* phase, involving new parties in the conflict and increasing the number of deaths and destructions. Meantime, positional but as much as strained conflict in Donbass was seen, where, despite the agreements reached within the Minsk process, systematic violations of the state of ceasefire occur, subversive terrorist acts are committed, deliberate confrontation occurs initiated by Ukraine against the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Lugansk in the political and informational field [9]. Surely, all those acts are nothing but continuing chess-game between the West and Russia on two chessboards simultaneously where parties seek to achieve their goals minimizing their losses.

The complexity of the current position of parties is as follows: on the one hand, accounting for the success of the governmental troops in Syria and the Russian Aerospace Forces in fighting the Islamists and the opposition, some US allies begin to say about developing cooperation with Moscow, postponing the regional contradictions to fight terrorism which is undoubtedly disliked by the US as well as Turkey and Saudi Arabia sponsoring the Islamists. Russia's position is strengthening in the negotiations on the Syrian conflict, in particular on the role of Bashar al-Assad in the current and postwar development of the Arab republic. If the West admits that al-Assad remains the head of the country, it will not only increase Russia's prestige in the international stage but will break all the USA's plans to arrange Big Middle East project, one of the stages of implementation of which is the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Russia will strengthen its presence in the region enabling it to influence the political processes and push the US allies. On the other hand, continuing operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces is costly for the Russian budget; the Russian economy against the background of international sanctions, fall of the national currency and oil prices is seeing a decline while hard international situation does not allow Russia either to decrease military costs or to shorten the scale of its operations in the Syrian theater. Here, the Kremlin hopes to successfully finish the peace negotiations in Munich, but they are delayed so far promising no somewhat exact result. Special resistance is faced from the Syrian opposition supported by Saudis and Turks insisting on previously declared conditions, in particular on ceasefire by the Syrian army. Currently, for Russia not only the active movement of the Syrian army, but also the brittle balance in Donbass is beneficial [10]. Nevertheless, that theater may play an own role in the conflict of Russia and the USA, reversing the situation not only in the southern theater but also in the whole conflict, turning the balance. In that connection, the issue on the

interrelation of the wars in Syria/Iraq and Donbass is arising, remembering Friedman's article and his thoughts on "operational space" in the Black Sea enabling "to actively response to the changes on both theaters".

DISCUSSION

The issue of interrelation of the Ukrainian and Middle Eastern conflicts has been raised in mass media for a few times. The first information about Muslims fighting in Ukrainian voluntary battalions dates back to 2014. Back then, the world saw the videos of combatants from so called *International peacemaking battalion named after Dzhokhar Dudayev*, fighting in Ilovaisk. Also, there was such division like *Crimea* battalion (earlier – hundred) formed mostly by Crimean Tatars. Those divisions, being non-Islamic initially, became the basis of future formations of Islamists among the Ukrainian forces in Donbass [11]. However, the first periodical to pay attention to the issue of interrelation of the two conflicts was the American information and analytical portal *The Intercept*, which published in February 2015 the article called "At the peak of war Ukraine is becoming the Jihad gate". In the article by Marcin Mamon, it was told how the leader of the underground group of the Islamic State in Istanbul went to Ukraine to join the other members of his organization fighting in Eastern Ukraine against the adepts of autonomy from Kiev and of union with Moscow. We note that the article completely showed the role of Turkey as a transfer site for global terrorists – not only those who arrived in the country to go to Syria then, but also for the jihadists going further to Ukraine [12]. Moreover, the fact is noted that Ukraine, in view of both conflicts, became a sort of a launching ground to Europe, a country where not only fighting for Allah and *brothers in faith* is possible, but also earning money on selling arms, racketeering and mining amber as well as buying cheaply arms and forged documents. "Ukraine is becoming an important transfer site for brothers… Here, a new passport may be bought with a new personality. For USD 15,000 a combatant may get a new name and documents acknowledging the Ukrainian citizenship. Ukraine is not a member of the EU, but from there it is easy to immigrate to the West" [13]. The author was the first to note that combatants are mainly hosted by voluntary battalions *Azov* and *Aidar* which proved Neo-Nazis, have bad reputation and are weakly controlled by the Ukrainian government.

The same was written about in *The New York Times* in July of that year in the article "In Ukraine, Islamists are fighting side by side with *Azov* Neo-Nazis". Then, the journalists reported that among ATO troops at least three divisions were fully comprised of Islamists – both Ukrainian citizens and foreigners. Two of them have already been mentioned, and the third one is Sheikh Mansur's battalion named after a hero of resistance to the Russian colonialism in the 18th century. Despite the fact that they are mainly manned by Chechens and Crimean Tatars, other combatants include Uzbeks, Balkars, and other Muslim nations. Many Chechens

arrived from European countries like Poland, Denmark, Germany, and France being members of immigrant Chechen organizations – successors of the idea of "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria". Such a seemingly strange union of Ukrainian Neo-Nazis and Islamic combatants is well-based. As an interviewee of Andrew Kramer (a Chechen fighter of Sheikh Mansur's battalion) said, he "deals well with nationalists as they, like him, love their homeland and hate Russians" [14]. Moreover, voluntary battalions are actually badly controlled by the Kiev authorities as they are afraid of them themselves: the battalions comprise mostly *Right Sector* members – an organization which unites many nationalist and Neo-Nazi organizations all over Ukraine [15]. Many fighters have military or criminal experience and are more motivated ideologically compared to Armed forces of Ukraine. Volunteers are a great power among ATO, on the one hand, playing the role of the most battle-worthy and best equipped divisions and, on the other hand, being a sort of anti-retreat units maintaining discipline at the battlefield. Battalions are funded by oligarchs and by military and financial assistance of the NATO countries [16].

About that time, Elliot Friedland warned in *The Jewish Voice* that intrusion of Islamists into Ukraine may have a lot of negative consequences: "United with the Ukrainian forces, Muslim units related to the Islamic State and Chechen Islamists are fighting. If the USA increases military aid to Ukraine, the army of which is unfortunately corrupted, our arms may be seized by Islamic battalions funded simultaneously by Ukrainian oligarchs, by the Persian Gulf countries and via criminal activities (including racketeering)" [17].

Later, it became known that the link between the conflicts is not one-way. In autumn 2015, new information was unveiled on suspicious contacts of Ukraine and some Middle East countries supporting the IS. In the article by Christopher Miller from *Mashable* agency, a case was acknowledged in November 2015: then, a citizen of Libya Usama Hayat was arrested in Kuwait; he bought Chinese man-portable air defense systems FN-6 in the black Ukrainian market and smuggled them via Turkey to the IS combatants in Syria. The Kuwait police arrested Hayat and five other combatants including three Syrians one of which proved an arms procurer for his organization and the second was in charge for negotiations and finance. Also, one citizen of Egypt and one citizen of Kuwait were arrested. Besides trading arms, that group reportedly was assisting Islamists recruiting new combatants and collecting money which then was sent to bank deposits in Turkey. The Ministry of Defense of Ukraine hurried to make a statement that the said systems have never been supplied to Ukraine and the government did not give its permission to transit those samples. Nevertheless, the existing uncontrolled zone in Donbass and high corruption in the Ukrainian army are providing a supportive environment to boost the arms black market in the conflict zone [18].

Later, Russian hackers from *CyberBerkut* group brought to light the documents evidencing that Qatar was negotiating with Ukrainian and Polish companies

including *Urkoboronprom* to buy air defense system S-125D *Pechora-2* and a set of Soviet air-bombs OFAB-250-270 in the amount of 2 thousand, and expressed their confidence that after the transaction Qatar would convey the arms to the Islamic State or any other jihadists. It was noted that the issue of arms supply was agreed with the Americans by both parties [19].

CONCLUSION

Such mutual relationship of conflicts may not be accidental. It evidences the implementation of the plan published by Friedman in 2014. Using its allies, coordinating their actions, the USA is trying to work in two directions in opposing Russia. Especially logically it looks against the background of Syria peace talks prolongation and new escalation of the Donbass conflict which are in total an attempt by the USA to make Russia disperse its material, military and diplomatic resources in two fronts simultaneously hoping that the Kremlin will not be able to maintain its "fighting efficiency" and will give ground. It will cause, among other, a threat to the national security of Russia, where the Islamic terror underground may trigger, as well as the general activities of our country's foes. Moreover, connecting these two conflicts, the United States and its allies are creating in Ukraine a new launching ground for Islamists and their further intrusion in Europe. Now, terrorists under the guise of refugees are intruding in the EU countries not only from Turkey's territory but also from Ukraine as mentioned above. Growing violence in Europe in connection with terrorist attacks in Paris and numerous incidents with migrants are the evidences thereof [20]. The current position of communicating vessels between the wars in Syria and Iraq and in Donbass breaks the security not only in the Black Sea and Caspian basin, not only in the Middle East but in Western Europe. Islamists with Ukrainian passports assisted by ultranationalist organizations like *Right Sector* having semi-autonomous combat formations opened an easy way to the West. Providing arms to Ukrainian battalions or so-called soft opposition in Syria, the USA is not only solving current problems with Russia, Iran and other countries but puts the EU in a more subordinate position while the EU has to take the combatants bred by them and making Germany, France and other states their launching grounds. As opined by Sierra Rayne, "…for the West the point is who it prefers to see as the force to control the Ukrainian territory, the IS or Russia. It is quite obvious that the second variant is much better. If the West wishes to create a normal coalition against the Islamic State it should send off the Turkish Islamists from the NATO, give Ukraine to Russia and then invite Russia to join the North Atlantic alliance (or the alliance to appear to replace it). It would allow uniting the efforts in fighting against global jihad" [21]. Such position seems the most reasonable for us from the standpoint of not only Russian geopolitical interests but also from the common sense point. The opportunity of joint fight of Russia, its allies and the NATO against Islamists provides a unique

chance to mutually enhance the relationships between the East and the West, however, until all the current conflict moments are settled, until the American foreign policy is critically analyzed by European and other allies, such cooperation is hardly possible to be spoken about.

Acknowledgments

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