

ISLAMSKA DRŽAVA IRAKA IN LEVANTA TER MEDNARODNI BOJ PROTI NJEJ

ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND THE LEVANT AND THE INTERNATIONAL FIGHT AGAINST IT

Povzetek Kriza v Iraku in Siriji bo še nekaj let v središču mednarodne in evropske pozornosti. Cilji glavnih velesil in koalicijskih partnerjev se razlikujejo, sedanje mednarodne institucije pa sploh niso učinkovite pri obvladovanju konfliktov, saj se po svetu širijo versko pogojena ekstremistična gibanja. V članku analiziramo okoliščine in vzroke za vzpon organizacije ISIL/DAESH, vlogo glavnih akterjev pri obvladovanju krize, sodelovanje tujih borcev in boj proti tej teroristični organizaciji.

Ključne besede *ISIL/DAESH, Sirija, Irak, Bližnji vzhod, terorizem.*

Abstract The Iraqi and Syrian crisis will dominate international and European agendas for several years. The aims of great powers and coalition partners are different; the existing international institutions are not at all effective in the handling of the conflict, while religiously-motivated extremist movements has been spreading in the world. This article analyses the causes and circumstances of the rising of ISIL/DAESH, the role of the main participants in the handling of the crisis, the participation of foreign fighters, and the fight against the terrorist organisation.

Key words *ISIL/DAESH, Syria, Iraq, Middle East, terrorism.*

Introduction “The Middle East influenced by the conception of Sykes-Picot began to disintegrate. Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges-Picot were British and French diplomats who redrew the map of the region between the Mediterranean Sea and Persia after World War I” (Friedman, 2014, p. 4). The Sykes-Picot agreement was signed in 1916 and determined the political situation of the region for many years by dividing the Arab lands between France and Great Britain. Today, as we witness the disintegration of

Iraq and Syria, there are many more political and economical interests (American, Russian, Kurdish, Iranian, Turkish and so on) so the Sykes-Picot agreement cannot hold for long.

The question is how far the collapse of the post World War I system will go. Will the national governments reassert themselves in a decisive way, or will the fragmentation continue? Will this process of disintegration spread to the other heirs of Sykes and Picot? This question is perhaps more important than the emergence of ISIL/DAESH¹. Religiously-motivated extremist movements are a factor in the region, and will assert themselves in various organizational forms. What is significant is that while it is a force, ISIL/DAESH is in no position to overwhelm other factions, just as they cannot overwhelm it. Thus it is not ISIL/DAESH, but the fragmentation and the crippling of national governments that matters. More than 300,000 Syrians have lost their lives in these five years of armed conflict, which began with anti-government protests before escalating into a full-scale civil war. More than 11 million others have been forced from their homes as forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and those opposed to his rule battle each other – as well as Extremists Claiming Affiliation with Islam (ECAI).

I am convinced that the book of Samuel P. Huntington on *The Clash of Civilization* (written 20 years ago) is also very relevant in 2016. “The religious revival has in part involved expansion by some religions, which gained new recruits in societies where they had previously not had them. To a much larger extent, however, the religious resurgence involved people returning to, reinvigorating and giving new meaning to the traditional religions of their communities.” (Huntington, 1997, p. 96).

1 THE SHORT HISTORY OF ISIL/DAESH

1.1 The Iraqi line

“ISIL/DAESH can trace its roots back to 2002, when Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – a Jordanian who was to gain notoriety in the Iraqi insurgency from 2003-2006 – founded a so-called jihadist organisation called *Tawhid wal-Jihad* in the north of Iraq. Zarqawi had been linked with al-Qaeda while in Afghanistan in the late ‘90s, but was not a member of the group and disagreed with the tactic of focusing on the ‘far enemy’ (the West) as opposed to the ‘near enemy’ (rulers in the Islamic world). Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi’s organisation grew more active and affiliated itself to al-Qaeda in 2004, becoming al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Despite the tactical differences, this made a useful alliance. Zarqawi’s organisation gained the recruiting and resourcing benefits of being part of a global and credible so-called jihadist organisation, while al-Qaeda gained an affiliate in Iraq, already by that stage the global centre of jihad.” (Welby, 2015).

¹ DAESH: *Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant- ISIL)*.

Zarqawi's AQI was an influential actor in Iraq's descent into chaos between 2003 and 2007. It had the explicit policy of stoking sectarian violence with the aim of rallying the Sunni community around Sunni so-called jihadist groups, a tactic that ISIL/DAESH is replicating now. This gained criticism from al-Qaeda's leaders, who felt that the indiscriminate and brutal violence risked alienating their supporters. However, it continued to support Zarqawi in public until he was killed in an airstrike in 2006.

In late 2006 AQI joined with eight other so-called Islamist insurgent groups to form the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), without permission from the al-Qaeda leadership. The name chosen for this new group indicated its ambitions: it was more than a mere jihadist group, but an embryonic caliphate, governed by Islamic law, to which all Muslims within its territory owed allegiance.

The alliance between al-Qaeda and ISIL/DAESH was no longer convenient. ISIL/DAESH could now claim a history and a support base that established its credibility, and al-Qaeda's central leadership was weak. An ISIL/DAESH spokesman declared that al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was sinful, and Jolani nothing less than a traitor. Shortly afterwards, Zawahiri announced that ISIL/DAESH had nothing to do with al-Qaeda.

The political and military successes of ISIL/DAESH in the summer of 2014 were shocking. Cities fell to ISIL/DAESH forces a fraction of the size of their defenders; soldiers were ordered to abandon their posts; and those soldiers who were captured were massacred. Based on its advance, the group declared a caliphate, a move that has split the so-called jihadist world despite long being the aspiration of such organizations.

"In September 2014, the US began a military campaign against ISIL/DAESH in Iraq and Syria, supported by more than a dozen European and Arab states. Extensive airstrikes have supported the operations of the Iraqi Kurdish ground troops in making strategic gains." (McInnis, 2014). In Iraq, the Peshmerga forces were able to dislodge ISIL/DAESH from key areas around Mount Sinjar in December 2014. Furthermore, in March 2015 Iraqi security forces, aided by Shia militias supported by Iran, launched the first major government offensive against ISIL/DAESH since June 2014, in Tikrit. However, 2015 brought setbacks for the group, including the Iraqi Kurdish forces. A hard-fought four-month battle for the city of Kobane, on the Syrian-Turkish border, culminated in victory for the YPG (Popular Protection Units) in January 2015 – although ISIL/DAESH has maintained a presence nearby. We have to note that NATO countries recognized both the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military division YPG as terrorist organizations.

By claiming responsibility for the November 2015 attacks in Paris and the downing of a Russian plane in Egypt, ISIL/DAESH gives the impression that the group, ordinarily focused on targeting the near enemy, is keen to convey a broadening of its operational strategy and the pursuit of targets further afield.

Regardless of these defeats, the development of ISIL/DAESH since 2013 has changed the nature of the group. It is no longer a mere terrorist group, but an army that can hold and administer territory. It governs according to harshly interpreted principles of Islamic law, including the imposition of *dhimmi* pacts on minorities – guaranteeing protection in exchange for the payment of a tax and the acceptance of second-class citizenship. Minorities, including Shia Muslims, have been subject to severe human rights abuses, including massacres and forced conversion, and the persecution of minorities in northern Iraq has been particularly brutal. ISIL/DAESH has also provoked shock and condemnation worldwide for its brutal execution of foreign journalists and humanitarian aid workers, as well as captured combatants from opposing forces. While the quality of its governance is questionable, it can broadly coerce the consent of the people it governs.

“At the end of 2015 the Iraqi army, with coalition air support, succeeded in gaining significant territories from ISIL/DEASH, including the reoccupation of Ramadi.” (Glenn, 2014).

1.2 The Syrian line

Pro-democracy protests erupted in March 2011 in the southern city of Deraa, after the arrest and torture of some teenagers who had painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. After security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing several, more took to the streets.

The unrest triggered nationwide protests demanding President Assad’s resignation. The government’s use of force to crush the dissent merely hardened the protesters’ resolve. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands were taking to the streets across the country.

Opposition supporters eventually began to take up arms, first to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas.

The violence escalated and the country descended into civil war as rebel brigades were formed to battle government forces for the control of cities, towns and the countryside. Fighting reached the capital Damascus and the second city of Aleppo in 2012.

“By June 2013, the UN said 90,000 people had been killed in the conflict. However, by August 2014 that figure had more than doubled to 191,000 – and continued to climb to 250,000 by August 2015, according to activists and the UN.” (UNHCR MUNIC VII, 2016, p. 6).

The conflict is now more than just a battle between those for or against President Assad. It has acquired sectarian overtones, pitching the country’s Sunni majority against the President’s Shia Alawite sect, and drawn in neighbouring countries and world powers. The rise of the so-called jihadist groups, including ISIL/DAESH, has added a further dimension.

“More than four million people have fled Syria since the start of the conflict, most of them women and children. It is one of the largest refugee exoduses in recent history. The neighbouring countries have borne the brunt of the refugee crisis, with Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey struggling to accommodate the flood of new arrivals. The exodus accelerated dramatically in 2013, as conditions in Syria deteriorated.” (Rodgers, BBC News, 11 March 2016, p. 1).

A further 7.6 million Syrians have been internally displaced within the country, bringing the total number forced to flee their homes to more than 11 million – half the country’s pre-crisis population. Overall, an estimated 12.2 million are in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, including 5.6 million children, according to UN reports.

“In December 2014, the UN launched an appeal for \$8.4bn (£5.6bn) to provide help to 18 million Syrians, after only securing about half the funding it asked for in 2014. By a year later, it was less than half funded. This is one of the causes of the refugee crisis into Europe.” (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, Asare, 2016, p. 1).

“A report published by the UN in March 2015 estimated the total economic loss since the start of the conflict was \$202bn and that four in every five Syrians were now living in poverty – 30% of them in abject poverty. Syria’s education, health and social welfare systems are also in a state of collapse.” (Conflict background I am Syria, 2016, p. 1).

The armed rebellion has evolved significantly since its beginning. Secular moderates are now outnumbered by jihadists, whose brutal tactics have caused widespread concern and triggered rebel infighting.

The Syrian war also facilitated ISIL/DAESH’s final break with al-Qaeda. Since 2006, the group’s relationship with al-Qaeda had been ambiguous, possibly deliberately so; the mutual benefits that had first prompted Zarqawi to affiliate to the organisation remained. In 2011, Baghdadi created a Syrian subsidiary, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), under Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. In 2013, with JN showing unwelcome signs of independence, Jolani announced their re-absorption into the expanded Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham – ‘al-Sham’ being the Arabic name for Greater Syria, with connotations of earlier caliphates. However, Jolani appealed to al-Qaeda’s central command, which ruled in his favour, ordering Baghdadi to confine his group to Iraq. Jabhat al Nusra split from al Qaeda in July 2016. The new name is Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of Syria). “The director of US National Intelligence described the split as a PR move.” (Sly, DeJoung, 2016, p. 2).

In subsequent fighting in Syria, much of it with other rebels including JN and other jihadist groups, ISIL/DAESH has gained and held significant amounts of territory. It captured the city of Raqqa from other rebels in early 2014, using it since as a base to launch attacks in Syria and Iraq. In Iraq, the group exploited botched Iraqi military operations in Fallujah in January 2014 to gain control of the city. Control of

sparsely populated transport corridors allowed them to advance rapidly in the kind of surprise attacks that delivered them Mosul, among other cities, in June of the same year. Profiting from the chaos in the region, ISIL/DAESH has taken control of huge swathes of territory across northern and eastern Syria, as well as in neighbouring Iraq. Its many foreign fighters in Syria are now involved in a “war within a war”, battling rebels and jihadists from the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, who object to their tactics, as well as Kurdish and government forces.

“ISIL/DAESH has been forced out of about 56 places where it once had control, including five major cities. This process has not yet finished. Unfortunately there are signs that the group has been shifting its focus from controlling territories to executing terror attacks in Iraq, Syria and abroad.” (Sly, DeJoung, 2016, p. 1).

The following maps show the territorial gains and losses in 2015 and 2016. I would like to remark that the size of territories and population has been changing day by day. When the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) was established in 2006, ISIL claimed seven Iraqi and 9 Syrian provinces, covering most of the countries. In autumn 2016 ISIL/DAESH lost about 45% of its former occupied territories (see Picture 1 and 2, p. 112).

2 ISIL/DAESH AFFILIATES AND ADHERENTS

Since 2014, some armed groups have recognized the ISIL/DAESH caliphate and pledged loyalty to Baghdadi. Groups in Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Afghanistan, and Nigeria have used the Arabic word “*wilayah*” (state/province) to describe themselves as constituent members of a broader IS-led caliphate (Blanchard, Humud, 2016, p. 3).

Why is it important to detail the ISIL/DAESH affiliates in 2016? Since the autumn of 2015, with the military actions of Russia and the other international coalitions, ISIL began to lose territories (up to August 2016 it has lost about 45% of its former territory). This does not mean the end of ISIL/DAESH, as some of its affiliate organisations are able to take over the task of ISIL.

In 2016, the following ISIL/DAESH adherents are the most significant and capable of terrorist actions:

2.1 ISIL/DAESH affiliates in Egypt (Sinai Province, Wilayah Sinai)

ISIL/DAESH’s local affiliate in the northern Sinai Peninsula was formerly known as *Ansar Bayt al Maqdis* (Supporters of the Holy House or Partisans of Jerusalem). It emerged after the Egyptian revolution of 2011 and affiliated with ISIL/DAESH in 2014.

Estimates of its membership range from 500 to 1,000, and it is comprised of radicalized indigenous Bedouin Arabs, foreign fighters, and Palestinian militants.

Among their armaments are man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS), such as the 9K338 Igla-S, and Kornet anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) systems. The organization has claimed credit for destroying Metrojet Flight 9268, which exploded in mid-air over the Sinai Peninsula on October 31, killing all 224 passengers aboard.

2.2 ISIL/DAESH affiliates in Saudi Arabia (Wilayah Najd/Haramayn/Hijaz)

IS leaders have threatened the kingdom's rulers directly and called on the group's supporters there to attack Shiites, Saudi security forces, and foreigners. ISIL/DAESH supporters have claimed responsibility for several attacks e.g. suicide bombing attacks on Shia mosques in different parts of Saudi Arabia, and in a Kuwaiti mosque, killing more than two dozen people and wounding hundreds. Saudi officials have arrested more than 1,600 suspected ISIL/DAESH supporters (including more than 400 in July 2015) and claim to have foiled several planned attacks.

ISIL/DAESH poses a unique political threat to Saudi Arabia, in addition to the tangible security threats demonstrated by a series of deadly attacks inside the kingdom since late 2014. IS leaders claim to have established a caliphate to which all religious Sunni Muslims owe allegiance, directly challenging the legitimacy of Saudi leaders who have long claimed a unique role as Sunni leaders and supporters of particular Salafist interpretations of Sunni Islam. ISIL/DAESH critiques of Saudi leaders may have resonance among some Saudis who have volunteered to fight for or contributed on behalf of Muslims in several conflicts involving other Muslims over the last three decades.

2.3 ISIL/DAESH affiliates in Libya (Wilayah Tarabalus/Barqa/Fezzan)

Supporters of ISIL/DAESH in Libya have announced *three* affiliated wilayah (provinces), corresponding to the country's three historic regions – *Wilayah Tarabalus* in the west, *Wilayah Barqa* in the east, and *Wilayah Fezzan* in the south-west. Some observers put the group's strength in Libya at several hundred to a few thousand fighters among a much larger community of so called Salafi-jihadist activists and fighters. Since late 2014, ISIL/DAESH supporters have taken control of Muammar al Qadhafi's hometown, Sirte, and committed a series of atrocities against Christians and Libyan Muslim opponents. They also have launched attacks against forces from Misrata and neighbouring towns in an effort to push westward and southward. ISIL/DAESH backers sought to impose their control on the eastern city of Darnah. There is no concrete data, but we can suppose that this organization can train people who could appear in Europe.

2.4 ISIL/DAESH affiliates in Nigeria (West Africa Province [Wilayah Gharb Afriqiyyah])

Two of the most significant African insurgent groups – Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia – are looking to ISIL/DAESH, possibly to gain momentum, as both groups are facing the increased pressure of successful military operations

against them. The Islamist group Boko Haram pledged its allegiance to ISIL/DAESH in early March 2015, more specifically to the ‘Caliph of Muslims’, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The pledge coincided with successful operations against Boko Haram carried out by a coalition of Nigerian forces and neighbouring countries affected by Boko Haram violence (Neill, 2015, p. 8). This north-eastern Nigeria based Sunni insurgent terrorist group is widely known by the name *Boko Haram* (“western education is forbidden”). In 2014 alone, 5,500 have been killed and more than 1.5 million people have been displaced by related violence, which increasingly spread into neighbouring Cameroon, Chad and Niger in 2015. The group threatens civilian, state and international targets, including Western citizens in the region. Boko Haram’s announcement of allegiance to ISIS coincides with its ousting from key towns in north-eastern Nigeria. Meanwhile, Somalia’s al-Shabaab also appears to be flirting with the idea of associating itself with ISIL/DAESH, having been seriously weakened by the African Union-led *Operation Indian Ocean* and US airstrikes targeting its leaders.

2.5 ISIL/DAESH affiliate in Yemen (Wilayah al Yemen, Wilayah Al Bayda, Wilayah Aden-Abyan, Wilayah Shabwah)

In Yemen, militants who claim allegiance to ISIL/DAESH have taken advantage of ongoing war to repeatedly bomb mosques known for attracting worshippers of Zaydi Islam, an offshoot of Shia Islam (with legal traditions and religious practices which are similar to Sunni Islam). ISIL/DAESH terrorists have targeted supporters of the Houthi Movement, a predominately Zaydi armed militia and political group that aims to rule wide swathes of northern Yemen and restore the “Imamate.”

2.6 ISIL/DAESH affiliate in Afghanistan and Pakistan (Wilayah Khorasan)

ISIL/DAESH is attempting to expand its reach in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. ISIL/DAESH presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan appears to consist of certain individuals of more mainstream insurgent groups, particularly the Afghan Taliban, showing themselves as members of “ISIL/DAESH of Khorasan Province,” or *Wilayah Khorasan*. This group differs from the Khorasan Group identified by U.S. officials as being an Al Qaeda affiliated cell seeking to conduct transnational terrorist attacks. It does not appear that the ISIL/DAESH leadership has sent substantial numbers of fighters from Iraq and Syria into Afghanistan or Pakistan. ISIL/DAESH’s presence and influence in Afghanistan remains in the exploratory stage. It is known that there is growing competition and conflict between the Taliban and ISIL/DAESH fighters.

3 THE AIMS AND INTERESTS OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PARTICIPANT COUNTRIES

3.1 United States

The United States lost its credibility in the Middle East because of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Its support in Iraq, but mainly in Syria, is very low from both the leadership and the general population.

“The US has accused President Assad of responsibility for widespread atrocities and says he must go. But it agrees on the need for a negotiated settlement to end the war and the formation of a transitional administration.” (Syria crisis BBC News, 30 October 2015, p. 1).

The US supports Syria's main opposition alliance, the National Coalition, and provides limited military assistance to "moderate" rebels. The question is, who are the moderate and who are the radical rebels?

Since September 2014, the US has been conducting air strikes on ISIL/DAESH and other jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq as part of an international coalition against the so-called jihadist group. But it has avoided attacks that may benefit Assad's forces or intervening in battles between them and the rebels.

A programme to train and arm 5,000 Syrian rebels to take the fight to ISIL/DAESH on the ground has suffered embarrassing setbacks, with few having even reached the frontline (nobody knows how many fighters have joined ISIL/DAESH after the training).

Assessing the role of the United States in Iraq and Syria, we cannot forget the current election campaign and the unsuccessful policy towards Iraq (and also Afghanistan). After the transfer of the focal point to the Far East in 2012, a new hybrid war began in 2014 in Ukraine against Russia. In the Middle East in summer 2016, the USA faced tremendous difficulties from Egypt to Yemen, not to mention Turkey. To tell the truth concerning the Iraqi and Syrian war, the US is satisfied with the proxy war. I really hope that after January 2017 the US policy toward Iraq and Syria will change, and they do more to diminish (and maybe to end) the war in these countries, reducing the refugee problem in Europe.

3.2 Russia

In the new multipolar world, Russia is attempting to establish its own place. First Crimea (with its special meaning for Russia and no hint of irredentism) and then Syria (where Russia fights against the arbitrary change of regimes and not for the current President of Syria Bashar al-Assad) indicate the global ambitions of Moscow, which no longer wants to be confined to the status of a rank-and-file regional power. Moscow has managed to mitigate some of the worst impacts of the post-Ukrainian adventure, such as isolation, and proved that to a certain extent it is a regional and global player. Putin has demonstrated a capacity to play his weak hand very well and has, at least, made the case that you cannot ignore Moscow.

Russia is one of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's most important international backers and the survival of the regime is critical to maintaining Russian interests in the country.

It has blocked resolutions critical of President Assad at the UN Security Council and has continued to supply weapons to the Syrian military despite international criticism.

Moscow wants to protect a key naval facility which it leases at the Syrian port of Tartous, which serves as Russia's sole Mediterranean base for its Black Sea fleet, and also has forces at an air base in Latakia, President Assad's Shia Alawite heartland. In September 2015 Russia began launching air strikes against rebels, saying Islamic State (IS) and "all terrorists" were targets. However, Western-backed groups were reported to have been hit.

President Vladimir Putin has said that only a political solution can end the conflict. No doubt he is right, but while there is no political agreement, unfortunately the situation on the battlefield influences the events.

"Three factors made the Kremlin's policies in 2015 quite different from routine political, diplomatic and economic dialogue." (Polikanov, Utkin, Smirnova, Kornilov, 2015; Russia Direct Report: Russia and the World: Foreign Policy Outlook 2016, p1). Firstly, the ominous shadow of ISIL/DAESH changed the dynamic of Russia's Middle East foreign policy. The rise of ISIL/DAESH gave impetus to all sides concerned to do as much as they could to join Russia's efforts to establish an international anti-terrorist coalition.

Secondly, 2015 witnessed an obvious shift from an exclusively Ukrainian focus in international politics to Syria as the topic most discussed by the key players in the region and beyond.

Thirdly, a strategic shift in Russia's Middle East policy took place on September 30 2015, when the Russian Air Force started to bomb ISIL/DAESH positions in Syria.

The three pillars of Russian foreign policy in Syria:

First, it is necessary to unite and coordinate the efforts of those who can make a real contribution to the fight against terror. It would be useful to coordinate the efforts on the basis of Security Council resolutions in accordance with the United Nations Charter. Whatever we say about some progress in international anti-terrorist efforts, this idea continues to be current. The anti-terrorist coalition is still going to emerge.

Second, all the concerned parties should facilitate the internal Syrian dialogue on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012.

Third, it is important to ensure an inclusive and balanced external support of the political process with the participation of Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Qatar. The European Union, according to Minister Lavrov, could also play a useful role, as well as China.

Unfortunately, clear misunderstandings between the concerned parties are quite evident. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and some other partners in the Syrian dialogue do not agree with the Russian proposals for the settlement of the crisis.

3.3 Turkey

The Turkish government has been a staunch critic of Assad since the start of the uprising in Syria. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said it was impossible for Syrians to "accept a dictator who has led to the deaths of up to 350,000 people". Turkey is a key supporter of the Syrian opposition and has faced the burden of hosting almost two million refugees. But its policy of allowing refugees and humanitarian aid to pass through its territory has caused foreign terrorists to use this territory to reach Syria and Iraq in order to join ISIL/DAESH. However, Turkey has made great progress in preventing FTFs from passing through its borders. "Several hundred suspected terrorists have been captured and sent back to their countries of origin, and also hundreds of terrorists have been arrested." (Capelouto, 2015, p. 1).

In addition to this information it is important to note that Turkey agreed to let the US-led coalition against ISIL/DAESH use its air bases for strikes on Syria.

The role of Turkey is extremely important, not only in the fight against ISIL/DAESH, but also in the fight against the radicalization of refugees. The possible radicalization of refugees is a problem of the near future. "The term 'radicalization' is used widely, but a consensus on its definition and drivers have yet to be achieved, and past research has proved of little explanatory value." (Dawson, Edwards, Jeffray, 2014, p. 10).

Turkey has, though, been critical of coalition support for the Syrian Kurdish Popular Protection Units (YPG) – an affiliate of the banned Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), recognized as a terrorist group by Turkey, the EU and the US.

The reconciliation between Turkey and Russia on 9 August 2016 significantly contributed to the fight against ISIL/DAESH, future regional developments and also the future of President Bashar al Assad. It is too early to assess the impact of this agreement, but we can establish it may also have an effect on the future of NATO.

3.4 The Kurdish problem

While speaking of the region we cannot neglect the situation of the Kurds. Because of its complexity this topic should be the theme of a separate study. This nation (about 30 million people mainly in four countries) merits an independent country, but the religious and civil war did not help this process at all. The position of the Kurds is "best" in Iraq, thanks to oil and the Iraqi history. They were able to defend themselves against the move of ISIS into the Kurd Autonomous area. The future of Iraq cannot be realised without Kurdish autonomy (more autonomies than they currently have). The western alliance helps the Peshmerga forces in fighting against ISIL, and the Kurds have an important role in fighting against ISIL in Iraq. In Syria the situation for the Kurds is much worse than in Iraq, since they are attacked not only by the Assad forces but also by the Turkish army.

A huge problem is the political division in the population. In Iraq the Kurds have a strong relationship with Turkey. In Syria the biggest Kurdish party, the PYD, is an enemy of Turkey and is in close contact with the PKK, which is in war with the government. The basic question is whether the Kurds can have territory and

independence after the reconciliation or not. The role of Turkey is indispensable in a future Kurdistan. I think that the establishment of a Kurdish state is a question of the distant future.

3.5 Iran

Iran as a Shia power is believed to help the Assad regime by providing billions of dollars for military advisers and weapons.

Assad is Iran's closest Arab ally, and Syria is the main transit point for Iranian weapon shipments to the Lebanese Shia Islamist movement, Hezbollah. Iran is also believed to have been influential in Hezbollah's decision to send fighters to western Syria to assist pro-Assad forces.

Militiamen from Iran and Iraq who say they are protecting Shia holy sites are also fighting alongside Syrian troops.

Iran has proposed a peaceful transition in Syria that would culminate in free, multi-party elections. It was involved in peace talks over Syria's future for the first time when world powers met in Vienna. The Russian-Iranian military cooperation in the fight against ISIL/DAESH (use of an Iranian airbase by Russian bombers) may open a new chapter in the relationship between the two countries.

3.6 Saudi Arabia

The Sunni-ruled Gulf kingdom says President Assad cannot be part of a solution to the conflict, and must hand over power to a transitional administration or be removed by force.

Riyadh is a major provider of military and financial assistance to several rebel groups, including those with religiously-motivated ideologies, and has called for a no-fly zone to be imposed to protect civilians from bombardment by Syrian government forces.

Saudi leaders were angered by the Obama administration's decision not to intervene militarily in Syria after a 2013 chemical attack blamed on Assad's forces.

They later agreed to take part in the US-led coalition air campaign against ISIL/DAESH, concerned by the group's advances and its popularity among a minority of Saudis.

The Syrian crisis happens to be the pivot of both the current European refugee challenge and the terrorist threat.

3.7 The role of international organizations

The ongoing crises in Europe and in the Middle East and North Africa demonstrate that the existing institutions (the UN, NATO, and the EU) are largely impotent and cannot provide a universal remedy for the resolution of these crises. Without going into detail I think that the international organizations have made a lot of declarations and decisions, but in the field there are few effects of these decisions. The UN has a clear position in the fight against ISIL/DAESH, but unfortunately the organization was not able to mediate between the belligerents. The result of the activities of NATO and the EU cannot be seen in the region.

4 PARTICIPATION OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

“According to U.S. intelligence officials more than 18,000 foreign fighters have now flocked to the region -- up from about 16,000 at the start of November 2014. An estimate by The National Counter Terrorism Center in September had put the number of foreign fighters at more than 15,000.” (Seldin, 2014, p. 1).

“The number of Western passport holders joining the fight has also grown to at least 3,000. Earlier estimates had put the number of Westerners fighting in Iraq and Syria at about 2,700.” (Besenyő, 2015, p. 5).

However, officials caution that the higher estimates do not necessarily mean that there are more fighters on the battlefield. U.S. intelligence officials say most of the foreign fighters heading to Iraq or Syria seem to be intent on joining ISIL/DAESH, although many are still fighting with the al-Qaida-affiliated Nusra Front or with other groups. There is also hope that the flow of foreign fighters to the region will begin to subside.

It is important to analyze whether ISIL/DAESH is indeed a rising Islamic jihadist force about to seize control of several countries in this region as part of its plan to establish an Islamic caliphate, or whether it is an organization with limited means and abilities, whose pretensions exceed its real strength and are derived from the world view of its leader. “Without minimizing the achievements of ISIL/DAESH, it appears that the secret of its power rests primarily on the weakness of its enemies. So far, ISIL/DAESH states are those whose central governments suffer from a lack of legitimacy among their citizens and ineffective control of large parts of their territory.” (Schweizer, 2014, p. 1). Most Sunni Muslims are not interested in the extreme interpretations of ISIS/DAESH, but at this stage they have no choice but to obey the organization, if only for the sake of appearances. Should ISIL/DAESH try to extend its conquests to areas of Iraq where there is an established Shiite population, such as the capital Baghdad or the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, it may well encounter a fighting population protected by an Iranian military force and the deeper involvement of Western countries, as happened when it threatened to penetrate the heart of the Kurdish region of Iraq. A similar response can be expected if ISIL/DAESH dares to confront Jordan or Turkey. For that reason, its threats to make similar advances against other countries of the region – Jordan, Lebanon, and certainly Iran and Turkey – are weak.

When starting a war it is important to clarify who is the enemy. The basic question is: who is the main enemy in Iraq and Syria? Unfortunately the belligerents have different goals and enemies. The main target is ISIL/DAESH, but the means of defeating it are different. This chapter attempts to perceive how complicated the situation is in Syria.

What began as another Arab Spring uprising against an autocratic ruler has mushroomed into a brutal proxy war that has drawn in regional and world powers.

ISIL/DAESH is an organization built around an idea. It is the latest, most competent and brutal perception of a way of thinking that is around a century old. It was not ISIL/DAESH that attacked New York in 2001, Madrid in 2003 or London in 2005, but those responsible were part of the same movement. That movement is extremism. At its core is a belief that all social, political and economic activity must be governed by a single interpretation of Islamic law, and violent jihad is a just way to achieve this.

In September 2014, a US-led coalition launched air strikes inside Syria in an effort to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL/DAESH, helping the Kurds repel a major assault on the northern town of Kobane. But the coalition has avoided attacks that might benefit Assad's forces or intervening in battles between them and the rebels.

In the political arena, opposition groups are also deeply divided, with rival alliances battling for supremacy. The most prominent is the moderate National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, backed by several Western and Gulf Arab states. However, this coalition has little influence on the ground in Syria and its primacy is rejected by other groups, leaving the country without a convincing alternative to the Assad government.

Iran and Russia have helped the Alawite-led government of President Assad and have gradually increased their support.

In September 2015, Russia launched an air campaign against Assad's opponents. Moscow said it was targeting "all terrorists", above all members of ISIL/DAESH, but many of the strikes hit Western-backed rebels and civilians.

The Syrian government has also enjoyed the support of Lebanon's Shia Hezbollah movement, whose fighters have provided important battlefield support since 2013.

Moderate opposition has, meanwhile, attracted varying degrees of support from its main backers – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other Arab states, along with the US, the UK and France. However, the rise of radical rebels and the arrival of so called jihadists from across the world have led to a marked cooling of Western backing. A programme to train and arm 5,000 Syrian rebels to take the fight to ISIL/DAESH on the ground has suffered embarrassing setbacks.

“The US-led campaign against ISIL/DAESH, known as Operation Inherent Resolve, has launched over 6,000 airstrikes against ISIL/DAESH and is killing about 1,000 militants every month, roughly the same number believed to be joining the group, leaving the group's manpower strength effectively capped at 30,000 to 40,000. ISIL/DAESH has had to adopt a different strategy since the beginning of aerial attacks on the group in Iraq and Syria, no longer having the freedom of movement it once enjoyed. With Russia entering the war and carrying out airstrikes against ISIL/DAESH targets, the group's capabilities will be further diminished.” (Welby, 2015, p. 1).

The December 2015 decisions on French, German and British air force engagement will probably have a limited effect on the developments in Syria, but they will play a significant role in the intra-European debates on foreign policy.

The disagreements on Syria will not disappear overnight, but they could take a milder form as the practical military-to-military communication in battling the radical groups, and the slow progress in political talks, could change the atmosphere. Military events will dictate many things in the diplomatic process.

As for Syria, it would be extremely problematic to preserve the integrity of the country when so many actors prefer to see sectarian cantons in Syria.

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis will dominate international and European agendas for several years. The unresolved conflict has a direct effect on both the European refugee crisis and on terrorism. With regard to the solution of the Iraqi-Syrian crisis, I am convinced that it will not happen in the short term; it will take many years. The coalitions are constantly transforming, and countries like Turkey are members of different coalitions. After the coup d'état in Turkey the Turkish armed forces became weaker, and this has had an effect on its participation in the Syrian-Iraqi conflict. The reconciliation of Russia and Turkey is also encouraging for the future of Syria. The participation of Russia in the political processes is indispensable. Russian-Iranian military ties are important, but raise a lot of security concerns in the region (it is enough to think of Israel and Saudi-Arabia). Referring to the policy of the United States, we cannot disregard the election campaign, but this is a temporary event. I am convinced that the new administration will participate more actively in the settlement. The common Russian-US actions against ISIS are also encouraging.

As for ISIL/DAESH, the military operations carried out since the end of 2015 by the Iraqi Army, helped by the coalition forces, have been a significant blow to the terrorist organisation.

The loss of territory, equipment and supporters are all good news, but based on previous experience, organizations like this follow an asymmetrical warfare which means more terrorism in the region and beyond. Religiously-motivated radicalism is spreading not only in the Middle East and Africa, but also in Europe.

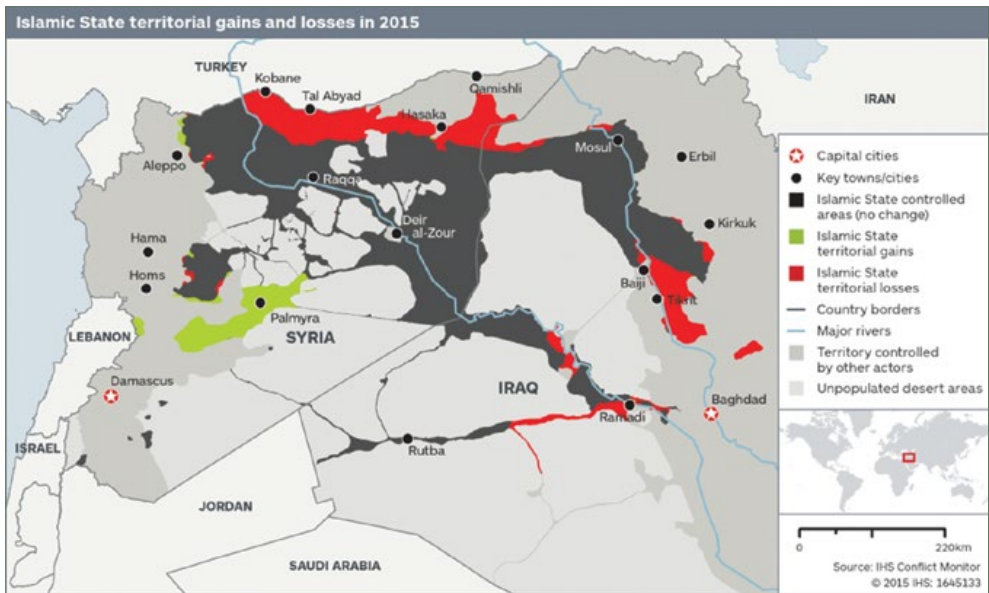
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Slika 1:
Ozemlja, ki jih je Islamska država pridobila in izgubila leta 2015
Vir:
<http://static3.businessinsider.com/image/map.png>, nazadnje obiskano 21. 8. 2016.

Figure 1:
Islamic State territorial gains and losses in 2015
Source:
<http://static3.businessinsider.com/image/map.png>, last visited 21 Aug 2016.



Slika 2:
Ozemlja, ki jih je Islamska država izgubila leta 2016
Vir: Institute for Study of war (31. 3. 2016), nazadnje obiskano 21. 8. 2016.

Figure 2:
Islamic State territorial losses in 2016.
Source:
Institute for Study of war (31. March 2016).
Last visited 21 Aug 2016

