



BULLETIN

No. 3 (735), 8 January 2015 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz ● Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk ● Artur Gradziuk
Piotr Kościński ● Sebastian Płociennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Marcin Terlikowski

The Islamic State: A Threat to Russia

Anna Maria Dyner, Kacper Rękawek

The Islamic State's military offensive constitutes not only a threat to other states of the region, Europe and the United States, but also to Russia. This is down to the potency of the spread of Islamist ideology within the borders of the Caucasus entities of the Russian Federation, and also the latter's international environment. For this reason, while criticising the American and European policies in the Middle East, Russia is simultaneously in favour of armed activities aimed at the Islamic State, and the Russian authorities are proposing the formation of a new, anti-terrorism coalition under the auspices of the United Nations. Poland should join it only if the U.S. and EU Member States are also going to participate.

Russia Vis-à-vis the So-called Islamic State. The operations of the Islamic State (IS), its military successes, and the drive towards the restoration of a caliphate cause anxiety in Russia, which is still threatened by Islamist terrorism. Thus, despite its critical posture towards U.S. policy in the Middle East, Moscow is supporting armed actions against the IS. From Russia's point of view, the short-term advantages of the U.S. and the main NATO members focusing on the air campaign against the IS, diverting their attention from the events in eastern Ukraine, are far less significant than the creeping destabilisation of the Middle East and the further development of international terrorism. The arrival of a new threat to regional interests and the stability of the transatlantic area gave Russia just one advantage: aggression in Ukraine has ceased to be the single challenge to European security. The IS offensive, however, does not translate into the oil price rise which could help stabilise the Russian economy.

Although Russia supports international anti-IS efforts, it maintains that a coalition aimed at disrupting this organisation should be operationalised only through the General Assembly of the UN. Russia also stresses that, in order to effectively combat the IS, a ground campaign should also be launched from Syrian territory. Russia criticises the United States' earlier policies in the Middle East, especially the intervention in Iraq from 2003 and the decision to arm the Syrian opposition combating President Bashar al-Assad's regime, and regards these as sources of the current crisis. Moscow is also critical of the Turkish position, and especially Ankara's lack of enthusiasm for supporting the Kurds who are fighting the IS in Iraq, allegedly because of Turkey's fear that it would only strengthen the military capabilities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party.

The Threat of Islamist Terrorism to Russia. The Islamic State's goal of establishing a caliphate is a serious terrorist threat to Russia. This goal's potential for influencing Russian citizens, especially those inhabiting the Islam dominated republics of the North Caucasus, such as Chechnya, Dagestan, or even Tatarstan, is significant and could lead to internal destabilisation of these elements of the Russian Federation. This threat is more poignant as the aforementioned republics have already borne the brunt of Islamist terrorism in Russia. Apart from that, the fact that the IS would spread its Islamist ideology could also destabilise Russia's closest international environment, in which the latter possesses strategic security and economic interests. Amongst Russia's fragile neighbours are: Azerbaijan, where authorities have already arrested 26 citizens accused of fighting for the IS, Uzbekistan (the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Usman Ghazi, announced his organisation's merger with the IS in October), Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have seen the rise of radical Islamist organisations recruiting fighters for the IS.

The next challenge to Russia's security is the participation of its inhabitants in the war in Syria.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) is estimating that approximately 400 Russians (other estimates put the number at 800, including 200 from Chechnya) are fighting alongside the anti-Assad rebels in Syria. Most of these are inhabitants

of the North Caucasus republic of the Russian Federation, and Russians from the Asiatic part of the country or the Central Asian republics. Many of these adopt the nicknames of “as-Shishani” (the Chechen), allegedly in reference to their Chechen origin or nationality, or rich experience in fighting with Russia. This is to ensure their high standing amongst the Syrian rebels. There are approximately 250 Chechens in Syria, many without previous military experience from either of the Chechen wars, and non-aligned with the separatist-Islamist rebellion in the country (the majority are in their twenties, and were children during the Chechen wars). Additionally, Chechen diasporas from Western Europe, Turkey, Jordan, Azerbaijan and Georgia are also quite numerous within the Chechen contingent in Syria. The veterans of the wars with Russia, including a small detachment of the Caucasus Emirate, the most well-known North Caucasus terrorist organisation, form one of the smallest groups amongst the Chechen fighters in Syria. However, some Chechens, including Abu Omar al-Shishani, who sits on the Islamic State’s council and is one of the most recognisable members of the organisation, play prominent roles amongst the Syrian rebels, and the Chechen dominated faction of the Syrian rebellion. The Army of Emigrants and Supporters (Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar), is perceived one of the most effective rebel units in the ongoing war.

The Chechen milieu in Syria is internally conflicted as its members recognise the authority of different fundamentalist organisations—IS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Their links with the Caucasus Emirate are also dubious, as the new Emir, Ali Abu Mukhammad, in a symbolic end to the Chechen domination of the North Caucasus rebellion, is Dagestani. Moreover, the number of Islamist rebels in Chechnya itself fell below 100 and as a consequence this entity is hardly active within Chechnya.

The Russian Fight Against Islamist Terrorism. Despite the fact that the threat of terrorist attacks on the territory of the Russian Federation is low, especially due to the involvement of Islamists from the Caucasus in Syria, the potential return of experienced fighters from Syria means that this threat may grow. Because of this, the Russian security services perform wide ranging anti-terrorism operations directed at the returnees, which conclude with trials of individuals accused of terrorism. It is also a response to fears in relation to Islamist terrorism—a poll by the Levada Center established that 55% of Russians regard the IS as an organisation threatening peace. Counterterrorism measures against the IS are also carried out by the Counterterrorism Centre of the Commonwealth of Independent States. On 29 December 2014, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation rendered a decision that IS and Jabhat al-Nusra are terrorist organisations and banned their activities in Russia. Such a move would give additional powers to the authorities when investigating their members.

Despite the fact that relatively few Russian citizens fight in the ranks of the IS, the Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov, asked the defence minister to reintroduce conscription in his republic. The Russian authorities complied, and for the first time since the dissolution of the USSR, approximately 500 people have been drafted into the army. This was also meant as a remedy to the problem of the potential terrorist pool in the North Caucasus. Kadyrov, in response to IS threats to the president of Russia and Russia itself, also proposed to block internet access in Chechnya so that young people would have more limited exposure to radical Islamist content.

The threat of Islamist terrorism could also be used for domestic political purposes in Russia. For example, the press has already published articles on radicalisation of Crimean Tatars and this could be seen as an excuse to infiltrate this ethnic group by the Russian security services. The Security Council of the Russian Federation also prepared the draft of the “Strategy on Countering Extremism until 2025,” which is aimed at members of Islamist organisations, including Central Asian migrants.

Conclusions and Recommendations. The downfall of IS and the stabilisation of the Middle East are Russian priorities as this will limit Islamist radicalism both in Russia itself and also in its immediate international environment. Moreover, attempts to form a transnational anti-IS coalition will offer Russia a chance to free itself from its international isolation caused by events in Ukraine. At the same time, the Russian presence in the counterterrorism coalition could encourage Central Asian and some of the Middle Eastern states that are not keen to join purely American initiatives.

Poland, also because of its campaign for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council, should support the establishment of such a coalition, but under the condition that both the U.S. and the EU Member States are also to be involved. This coalition should not only be focused on combating radical Islamists, but should also attempt to force both sides of the Syrian conflict to negotiate an end to the civil war. At the same time, cooperation with Russia on combating the IS should not affect the EU’s view on the Ukrainian crisis. In order to strengthen the Polish involvement in the fight against terrorism, Poland could support, both materially and with training, the countries of the Western Balkans Counterterrorism Initiative (including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo), which are seeing a number of their Muslim citizens leaving for the conflict in Syria.

While North Caucasian foreign fighters are active in Syria, it is essential to maintain intelligence cooperation between the EU Member States and Russia. This cooperation, aimed at combating threats from the return of fighters of North Caucasian origin to their previous EU countries of residence, could be the basis of pragmatic dialogue between the West and Russia, and could continue regardless of EU sanctions against the latter. This dialogue should strive to prevent potential terrorist attacks both in the EU and in Russia and also to disrupt the finances of the IS and its recruitment drives.