

April 2019
Sofia,
Bulgaria

DE RE MILITARI JOURNAL

CONFLICTS, MILITARY, ANALYSIS
ENGLISH ISSUE

DE RE MILITARI

De Re Militari is a Bulgaria-based group of analysts, which follows the development of conflicts and political processes worldwide. Our purpose is to provide the broad audience in Bulgaria with in depth understanding of the processes that are shaping the conflict around the globe. All our work is freely available on the Internet and has been used by students of political science worldwide in the conduct of their academic research, as well as from specialists in the field, NGOs and government structures.

Published in Sofia, Bulgaria

Issue: 04.2019

Blog of the journal:

www.remilitari.wordpress.com

Facebook & Twitter:

<https://www.facebook.com/deremilitari>

<https://twitter.com/remilitari>

Contacts:

deremilitarijournal@gmail.com

ISSN 2367-9476

AUTHORS

RUSLAN TRAD

Freelance journalist, analyst and author with over ten years' experience covering and analysis of MENA, Balkans and Turkey regional issues; co-founder of De Re Militari Journal; and author of the book "The Murder of a Revolution" (2017).

DR. ALEKSANDAR STOYANOV

Dr. Aleksandar Stoyanov is a co-founder of the De Re Militari journal. He has graduated from the Leiden University with a PhD in History and is working in the field of Military History for the past twelve years. Dr. Stoyanov has five published books and dozens of articles in different scientific and popular journals.

VENTSISLAV BOZHEV

Political scientist and an expert in the field of international relations with extensive experience in analysis of the European political processes as well as the dynamics of the relations in the Middle East and the former Soviet Union. Author of many publications and academic texts on the subject.

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EXCLUSIVE: INTERVIEW WITH MARK GALEOTTI



Mark Galeotti is a Senior Associate Fellow, Royal United Services Institute, and analyst of the Russian politics and global crime. He is an author of numerous books and analyses. Founding editor of the journal *Global Crime*, former European Editor of *Low-Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*. He is also a member of the editorial boards of *Crime & Justice International* and *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, and a Contributing Editor for *IntelliNews Business New Europe*, and a regular columnist for *Raam op Rusland*. Galeotti is also on the international advisory board of the Andrei Sakharov Research Centre for Democratic Development at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, and the Las Vegas Mob Museum. You can follow his blog¹, Twitter² or search for his books³.

In your book “The Vory: Russia's Supermafia”⁴, you outline several stages of relations between the authority and the underworld, unraveling in Russia for the past 100 years. Is there a “trinity” between the oligarchs, the avtoritety and the current administration that could be perceived yet another stage of this complex relationship?

There is, although interestingly enough since the 1990s – when the world of crime, politics and business all but merged – they have become distinctive again. The government calls the shots, the oligarchs deal with the more commercially-minded gangsters’ bosses, the *avtoritety*, but there is a clear sense of separation. Furthermore, there is a fourth, increasingly unwelcome component, the old-style gangsters. As the *avtoritety* increasingly blend into the business class, in many cases they are looking to break their links with their old partners in crime.

¹ <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/>

² <https://twitter.com/MarkGaleotti>

³ https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Galeotti/e/B001HCZ4AG/ref=dp_byline_cont_book_1

⁴ <https://www.amazon.com/Vory-Russias-Super-Mafia/dp/0300186827>

How do people like Igor Sechin and Yevgeny Prigozhin fit in this pattern of oligarchs, avtoritety and administration?

Sechin has a personal relationship with Putin, who trusts him, and this is arguably the most valuable resource in Russia today, and what got him his current job running the Rosneft oil corporation. Prigozhin, by contrast, is a perfect example of what I call the “*adhocrats*,” a figure who has no fixed role in the system, just doing whatever the Kremlin wants done today. He has catered for Putin’s parties, fed the Russian army, run one of the infamous social media “troll factories,” and now manages the Wagner mercenary organization. In every case, it is because this is what Putin and the state needed him to do. At the very top level, after all, the distinctions between oligarchs, bureaucrats and shadier figures fall away: this is Tsar Vladimir’s court, and he has favorites like Sechin, allies like defense minister Sergei Shoigu, and servants, like Prigozhin.

Russia has extended its economic, military and political influence across Africa. Which is the driving force behind this process? Are private economic interests leading or are they following on the political agenda, carried out by the Kremlin?

The Kremlin is looking to assert Russia’s great power status, and to a considerable extent this means building up international status and toe-holds in areas that the West – especially the USA – might at some time find important. At the same time, Russia lacks the money to buy allies like the Chinese, let alone deploy substantial forces. Therefore, it has in some ways privatized the process, encouraging private or state commercial interests to get involved, making money for themselves and building influence for Moscow in the process. This is a classic move by Putin’s Russia, harnessing private and corporate interests for a wider government agenda, and doing so on the cheap.

In the past few months, Russia has deployed troops and mercenaries in several countries, most notably Sudan, CAR, Madagascar and Venezuela. Is this an over extension or is it a calculated projection of power?

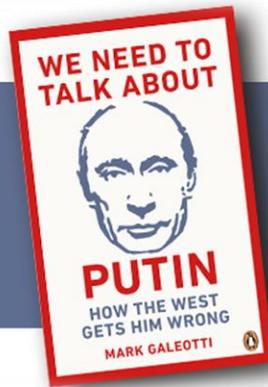
These are all relatively small commitments, and often wholly or partially financed through being granted local economic concessions. A few hundred mercenaries or soldiers and cybersecurity specialists in Venezuela, for example, is a small enough deployment, but very cost-effective. After all, if the Maduro regime falls anyway, no one could really expect Moscow to have prevented the USA from asserting its power in its neighborhood, but at least it demonstrates that it does not abandon its allies. And if the regime survives – regardless of how important the Russian forces were – then this can be spun as a victory, that Moscow successfully challenged Washington in its own backyard.

*In your recent book “**We need to talk about Putin**”⁵, you emphasize on the necessity to distinguish fact from fiction when analyzing the actions of Russia's president and his supposed abilities and intellectual capacity of a Machiavellian mastermind. Which are the main myths regarding Putin, which need to be “busted” in order for the West to perceive Russia in a correct way?*

I run through a number in my book, but the most significant ways in which we fall prey to both the Kremlin's spin and our own fears, are to see Putin as a strategic mastermind and a daring gambler. He clearly has no coherent strategy, only a broad set of objectives, and his approach is essentially opportunistic. As a good judoka, he strikes whenever he believes his enemy is vulnerable. Sometimes this works, often this fails, but it is driven by opportunity. Russia's campaign against the West is also to a large extent not run from the Kremlin but generated from below: all kinds of “political entrepreneurs,” from oligarchs and intelligence agencies, to journalists and diplomats, take initiatives when they think they have a chance to further the

⁵ <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1117583/we-need-to-talk-about-putin/9781529103595.html>

Kremlin's agenda. If they fail, they fail; but if they succeed, the Kremlin retrospectively blesses and rewards their actions. Thus, when we have trouble spotting a grand strategy behind Russia's varied and often contradictory actions, it is because there isn't one.



MEET THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS MAN.

WHO IS THE REAL VLADIMIR PUTIN?
WHAT DOES HE WANT?
AND WHAT WILL HE DO NEXT?

Likewise, despite the bare-chested macho image Putin projects, the evidence suggests he is very risk averse in practice, often postponing decisions until he is sure he knows the outcome. Of course, he gets things wrong, especially because these days people tell him what they think he wants to hear, rather than what he needs to hear. But many of his seeming gambles, such as the 2014 intervention into the Donbas or the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018, reflected miscalculations and bad intelligence: he thought they were safe bets.

Apart from its foreign political issues, Russia has met with several very important problems at home. Which are the main issues that could have a destabilizing effect on the Russian federation in the near future?

The economy is in decent, if not wonderful shape. People are unhappy, but not violently so. There are no genuine serious threats to Russia's security. The real challenge is likely to surround Putin's health or his likely attempts to manage a political transition. For twenty years almost, he has been the sun around which the rest of the political system has orbited, and it is unclear how well it will cope with change, especially when issues such as corruption

continue to provide potential rallying points around which genuine political protest could cohere.

Many opponents of Putin and his administration believe that the West could simply outlast the current Russian government by continuing with the economic pressure. Could a country in which a third of the GDP is embezzled by the “gray sector” be intimidated by legal economic sanctions?

The sanctions regime is irksome, but not disastrous, and even the wholly legitimate parts of the economy are generally coping. Barring all-out economic warfare designed to break the country – which would be tremendously dangerous, not least as they would force Putin into some violent escalation – then the sanctions regime is more about signaling protest at Russia’s actions. The irony is that Moscow actually thinks time is on its side, that the Western consensus on the sanctions regime will break before it feels it has to compromise.

So far, Russia has gone through periods of ups and downs regarding the proportion of power, concentrated in the hands of the state and the mafia. There seems to be a continuing pattern though. So, what comes next? What will the next “trinity,, look like?

There have been interesting signs of movement: arrests of some major gangsters, a new law allowing criminal bosses to be imprisoned just for that, without having to prove they committed any specific crimes. I suspect in the next decade we will see a campaign against the tattooed “blue-collar criminals” by the new blended business elite of “white-collar criminals” and their allies in the state. This will be less to do with law and order and more about taming an increasingly unreliable and inconvenient underworld in the interests of those now looking to legitimize their money and power.

After all, when Putin eventually dies or surrenders power, I think the dominant force will be the pragmatic kleptocrats, who will want to improve

relations with the West, but also protect their wealth at home. Ironically, it is the more successful criminals, the ones who can afford to look legitimate, who will lead the charge against their street-level counterparts.

IF YOU THINK PUTIN IS A SELF-CENTERED WARMONGER, YOU HAVEN'T PAID MUCH ATTENTION IN YOUR RUSSIAN HISTORY CLASS

Dr. Aleksander Stoyanov

Ever since 2008, Western media has built upon the notion of Russia's leader Vladimir Putin as a warmonger and a Machiavellian mastermind, who aims at exploiting any weakness, demonstrated by his opponents. While there are certain trends which verify such an idea, the notion that Putin's policy is a novelty in Russia's foreign political tradition is false.

While Putin's authoritarianism has served as a role model and a benchmark for many world leaders in recent decades, neither his foreign political approach nor his schemes are unique, measured against the substantial background of Russia's previous entanglements abroad. For anyone who has been living under a rock for the past 600 years, it's worth noting that Russia is a first-rank power, which has built upon a vast legacy of failures and triumphs – both military and diplomatic. Thus, when considering Putin's foreign political moves, it's always helpful to read through the thick historical books in search of previous instances in which Russia's paramount leaders – grand princes, tsars, emperors and chairmen of the USSR's political machine, have reacted to similar challenges.

Regardless of the historical period, each great state's foreign policy is determined by a set of similar factors. Economic potential, military power, geographic location and the qualities of the leading political and military figures all predetermine the development of Great Powers throughout history. The Russian federation is no exception. The only significant difference comes from the fact that there are only a handful of states the uninterrupted political tradition of which dates back as far as Russia's. Take for example the interactions with the Middle East. Russia is probably the first foreign power to try to meddle in the region's affairs as early as the 16th century when Ivan III and his successors established relations with the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia and the multitude of states and tribes in the Caucasus. For the next four centuries, Russia would gradually gain and store knowledge and understanding for that region and would model its approach

according to this rich database. Compared to such background, the US, with its 70 years of Middle Eastern policy, looks a bit like a newbie. The October revolution of 1917 and the fall of USSR in 1991 certainly sent shockwaves, which greatly disturbed the existing foreign political trends, but both contemporary and Soviet-era diplomats and leaders were rather quick in restoring and reasserting Russia's political agenda in the contested regions.

The war in Georgia, occupation of Crimea and the intervention in East Ukraine at first seem as rather uncertain political adventures. Many have tried to portray these acts of aggression as ad hoc decisions, moves intended to patch things up in the last minute. Such notions are very far from what is happening in the hearts and minds of Kremlin's leader and his close advisers. What might seem as a last-minute response to growing foreign pressure is in fact part of a long-term political program. Russia has built and defined a set of boundaries and areas of influence that have changed little in the past couple of centuries. The Caucasus has been viewed as a backyard since at least mid-16-th century. Dominance in Central Asia has been sought after since 1716. The Balkans were nurtured as a region of pro-Russian sentiments at least since 1765 and political and economic presence in the Indian ocean has been a goal since 1722. Russia has made it clear that economic and political developments in East and Central Europe were in its sphere of interest since 1733 and even the Far East has been targeted as yet another, even though remote, backyard since mid-18th century.

All those centuries of foreign political interest saw a constant interaction between political, economic and military pursuit of mastery on Russia's behalf. To put it simple – if any area of the world has once been in Russia's sphere of influence or territorial control, it will remain so regardless of the political model which governs the Kremlin at the present time. Western historians have long pinpointed the fact that Stalin used the schemes of 19th century Pan-Slavism in order to build his post-WWII Soviet empire.

TODAY, PUTIN IS SIMPLY REVIVING THE OLD TRENDS.

This time instead of communist internationalism, Russia's leader is throwing his lot on conservative nationalism...just as Russian leaders did in mid-19th century. Or contrary to the now-popular meme – modern problems do not necessary need modern solutions.

In this context military intervention has never been the last resort of tsars. Rather, it's usually either the first or the second. There is no simple answer to the question why Russia prefers to handle its foreign opponents by force. It's probably due to the same reasons why, for example Habsburg Austria has tried to handle them through diplomatic means. Possessing a vast country with limitless natural resources, a huge population and a geography which makes all important economic and political centers almost untouchable probably contributes to bellicosity. Another explanation comes from the fact that nothing strengthens authoritarian power as much as frequent conflicts and states of emergency.

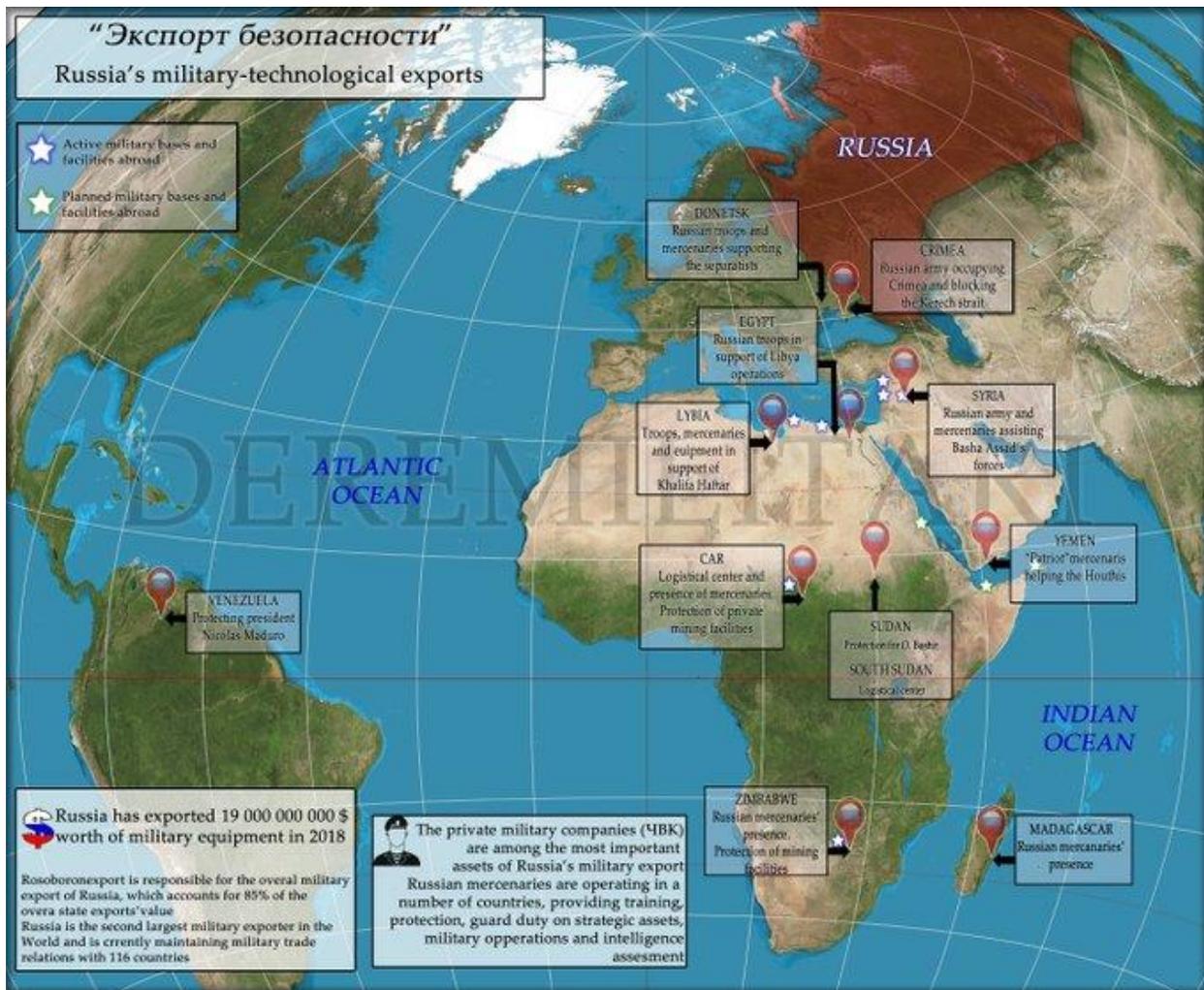
Russian powerholders have utilized war as means of concentrating power and extracting loyalty and submission for centuries. The Soviet Union was practically maintained based on supposed constant military threat from abroad. Alexander II used the war with the Ottoman empire to divert public attention away from the increasing terrorist activity of Russia's anarchists, and Peter I laid his entire reform program on the failure of the old boyar army against Sweden in the initial stages of the Great Northern War (1700-1721). Today, military success in Syria is used to promote foreign success parallel to the introduction of ever stricter laws and freedom of speech limitations at home. In a recent report to the annual military conference in Moscow, chief of staff Valeri Gerasimov has noted that Russia is under constant threat from the West and that it needs to utilize its military potential in order to thwart any enemy initiative, aimed at the Federation. In Gerasimov's words, this must be achieved by submitting the army and the society to strict regulations, which must protect the people from supposed ideological threats and covert ops.

The projection of power into experts call the “far abroad” is also not a new idea of Putin’s court. While today we see Russian troops and mercenaries in Venezuela, Libya and Sudan, promoting Kremlin’s interests with rather small investment of money and materials, this practice has been well tested before.

In 1896, Russia sent military advisors to Abyssinia to thwart Italy’s invasion. It was a small mission of a few dozen officers and a cargo of several thousand guns, but it proved enough to strengthen Orthodox brotherhood between the two states. In 1923, the Soviet Union helped local communists in Bulgari organized a failed rebellion. Two years later, two Soviet agents and a few hundred guns were sent for an attempt at behedging Bulgaria’s political elite in what became the bloodiest terrorist act in the country’s history. Both investments were cheap and had no repercussions for the USSR, but were later used as leverage on Moscow’s behalf, when the Bulgarian communist party took over in 1944. To turn the clock a few centuries back, in the first decades of 18th century, Russia provided a small amount of money and guns to the Montenegrins in exchange for the recognition of Petersburg as the “big brother” directing Cetinje’s foreign political direction. Similarly, during Catherine’s wars against the Ottoman empire, Russia provided limited military and financial support for the Greek rebels in the Peloponnesus only to leave them hanging once the Hellenic cause was no longer valuable for Petersburg’s war effort. As with their contemporary engagements, these were all low-risk interventions, from which Russia (USSR) could disengage with no or almost no damage to its resources and reputation. Besides, part of the benefit of being Russia is that people around the world generally expect the Kremlin to act in this matter and thus there are no positive expectations that need to be met. If things turn out fine, its only for Moscow’s benefit.

Finally, there is the political meddling in elections. The world was shocked by the interference in the US vote in 2016 that brought Trump into power. This has drawn attention away from similar moves played on a smaller scale in the decades before. Still, fixing votes has been a common game for Russia’s foreign policy for a long time. During the imperial period, Russia constantly interfered in the political matters of Balkan countries. In Bulgaria, for example, Russia was the game changer in elections in the late 1870s,

the 1880s and the 1890s. Governments rise and fell according to Petersburg's approval and even the first Bulgarian monarch – Alexander Battenberg, had to abdicate due to Russia's political pressure. The Soviet Union similarly interfered in political processes in the Interwar period, and later orchestrated elections across Eastern Europe after World War II. During the Cold War, USSR's political meddling abroad was only matched by that of the United States. To go back deeper into the past, Russia was essential for establishing the rulers of Eastern and Central Europe in the Age of the Succession wars, and after the Congress of Vienna. In the upcoming years, Russia will certainly interfere in the post-war reconstruction of many countries in Africa and Asia and will also seek to promote its political interests through local supporters in Eastern Europe.



Russia has long been a prime-time player on the global political chess board. While its economic resources are limited, compared to its former incarnations, the Kremlin empire remains a pivotal power, that will continue to rise not so much due to its own strengths, but by exploiting the weaknesses and wrong decisions of its global and regional opponents. Putin is not so much a Machiavellian mastermind, but rather an adaptive product of the turbulent 1990s, who knows how to find and utilize the errors of his opponents. In this context, the master of Kremlin can also rely on centuries of experience by his predecessors, who usually followed the same general agenda that now drives Russia through its journey ahead in history.

ARE ISIS COMING BACK IN SYRIA AND IRAQ?

Dr. Aleksander Stoyanov

On the 23rd of March, 2019 the coalition of Kurdish and Arab militias, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), announced its victory over the final ISIS stronghold in Syria in Baghouz Fawqani.⁶ The end of the battle also marks the completion of the main phase of operation “Inherent resolve”, which started on 15 June, 2014. There can be no trace of doubt in the fact that the United States were the main driving force behind the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria during the past 4 years. Any attempt by other countries to claim primacy in this matter is only aimed at promoting foreign and domestic interest in certain states and has no real dimensions whatsoever.⁷

It was expected that a victory at Baghouz would spring a series of cheerful comments and celebrations. The more experienced and well-prepared analysts were quick to dismiss the overexcitement and pointed to the fact that the real struggle against IS has just began – the struggle for the hearts and minds of the people in Syria and Iraq. Specialist around the world has long ago recognized the fact that only by strengthening the resolve of the locals and by substantial improving their living conditions and education, could the Coalition and its allies hope to prevent the return of the jihadists. It was back in October 2016 when our team issued the first warnings that if the Coalition fails to dismantle Daesh's local networks, the tumor will regrow once more and spread.⁸ The months and years after that have confirmed our thesis, supported by the works and reports of a number of well-established analysts and specialists in Middle Eastern studies and politics.⁹ Our weekly reports on the events in Syria and Iraq, as well as similar papers, provided

6 In the following text, the Islamic States, ISIS, IS and Daesh will be used to describe the same terrorist organization.

7 A quick look at Twitter accounts of Russian and Iranian supporters might give you a hint of these claims and the effect they are having on the general population of certain countries.

8 Ребусът „Даеш“, (*The “Daesh” puzzle*), *De Re Militari*, XXVI, p.3-11

9 For example – H. Hassan, ‘Insurgents Again: The Islamic State’s Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond’ *CTC Setntinel*, vol. 10, issue 11, December 2017, p. 1-8

by NGOs and Governmental structures, demonstrated that ISIS was slowly but steadily rebuilding their network, counting on a certain local level of engagement, of which mention will be given further in the article.¹⁰

In the early weeks of 2019, all leading security experts and specialists monitoring the Middle East have clearly stated that the Islamic State are on the verge of resetting its network across Iraq and that the victory of SDF and the Coalition in Syria is far from final and complete. The fight for Syria has just entered another stage, the roots of which can be traced as far back as the fall of Raqqa in 2017. Then, as we did an year earlier, De Re Militari warned that the IS is rebranding its operational strategy in order to adapt to the new conditions in the Middle East.¹¹ In the following months this strategy of adaptation was transferred to the other ISIS local structures in Libya, Somalia and Afghanistan.

„THE NEW“ FACE OF ISIS

Immediately after the serious setbacks and defeats, sustained in the end of 2016 and trough 2017, the Islamic state took a series of measures to adapt to the everchanging ecosystem of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. In the months to come, many will claim that these changes are product of the 2018-2019 period, while in fact these transformations are a constant feature of the jihadists' development since 2006, when ISI emancipated from Al Qaeda. The changes applied by the terrorists on their organization structure can be divided in two general groups. The first one consists of the momentary decisions, best described by the Latin term *ad hoc*. These are measures, which are applied as a reaction to a process in the happening and are not a product of a long-term strategy or concept. Decisions of the sort are mostly related to local IS segments and the tactical decision making in the course of offensives and defensive battles. The second group of transformations are related to the long-term strategy of ISIS defined in 2013-2014 in a series of

10 For example reports by „Institute for the study of war“ or „the Atlantic council“.

11 „Победени, но не и разгромени...или как Ислямска държава се опитва да се адаптира към новата тактическа и стратегическа обстановка в Ирак и Сирия“

(<https://remilitari.wordpress.com/2017/10/25/bentbutunbroken/>) (Defeated but unbroken -or how ISIS is trying to adapt to the new tactical and strategic reality in Iraq and Syria) DE RE MILITARI JOURNAL | CONFLICTS, MILITARY, ANALYSIS

papers, which are based on earlier concepts dating back to 2006. These decisions are linked to the main components of IS's policy and to the way the terrorist group functions in the broader context. These changes and adaptations could be summed up under another Latin concept – *modus operandi*.

The strategy of building local underground structures is set in papers as early as 2007, when the jihadists of ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) are still held together by a loose structure and their positions in Iraq are under the constant pressure of Iraqi authorities and the US mission.¹² After 2008, building upon the objectives, listed in the document and the accumulated experience, ISIS began to establish their system of local level structures. This was a complex and long process, which developed in several stages. The procedure very much resembles the establishment of underground networks at the end of the Cold War, drawing experience and know-how from states like Columbia and Mexico, as well as from the Russian mafia.¹³ This trend was also promoted by the variety of nationalities which made up ISIS, bringing in their experience from back home. Apart from the underground experience, IS capitalized on the rich practical and ideological heritage provided from its predecessor – Al Qaeda. AQ's experience on the other hand, has been formed in a long process of fighting the USSR in Afghanistan and later confronting the USA around the globe. Further back, the AQ database can be linked to the ideas and practices of Cold war guerrilla warfare, going back to WWII.

The first step in infiltrating a certain region by the jihadists is the establishment of a fighting segment, which simultaneously begins gaining power and establishing a network of “eyes and ears” in order to target and monitor all key targets in the selected area – both in terms of infrastructure and prominent social figures. The next step is the formation of more complicated battle teams, in order to carry out aggressive operations. After

12 The text can be found here - <https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/after-the-battle-for-mosul-get-ready-for-the-islamic-state-to-go-underground/>.

13 For a well-written account on the underground networks in Latin America, see R. Savini “Zero zero zero”; For the Russian mafia check M. Galeotti, *The Vory: Russia's Super mafia* (Yale: Yale University press, 2018)

that, the jihadists aim at absorbing or destroying existing underworld networks in order to monopolize violence and create a powerhouse, able to challenge the authorities. Along with the assimilation, the terrorists absorb certain illegal means of gaining additional finance – extortion, trafficking, smuggling, illicit trade and kidnaping. Parallel to their underworld expansion, IS moves in to infiltrate existing religious structures, both bringing in loyal clerics and eliminating possible opposition in the existing clergy. After the initial stage is completed, the IS sends in higher ranking members to take command and further expand the existing venture. The newly established structure resembles a council of ministers, each with a head and several branch leaders, responsible for war, finance, trade and logistics.¹⁴

Each of these components has a specific set of tasks, which are taken over by selected segments of the local structure. The entire structure is monitored by a regional body with basically the same main components. On the top of the provincial hierarchy sits the council of the *wilayah* (province), which is also structured along the well-established line. The provinces on their turn are monitored by a central structure, the influence of which varies regarding the distance and autonomy of the separate provinces. While it is a centralized structure, provincial segments maintain a rather flexible and broad autonomy in order to better react to last-minute situations. Thus, rather than using a pyramid, the overall structure of ISIS could be better described as a network of self-supporting components, linked to a main body that dictates the *modus operandi*, but leaves the *ad hoc* decisions to the local governing bodies. The same structure is applied by both mafia groups (in Russia for example) and by Al Qaeda. The difference comes from the fact, that while mafia and Al Qaeda tolerate the existence of branches and supporting, but independent groups, ISIS incorporates all existing local fighters into a single structure, not recognizing separate entities in its global network.

The structure, described above, has been used in practice to develop, maintain and expand ISIS's influence up to 2013. In the following years, IS took the next step in its evolution – the establishment of direct territorial grip

14 CTC, document [MNFT-2007-005313](#) – ‘Example of a Simple Structure for Managing the State Affairs’

over areas of Iraq and Syria. This was the moment, when Daesh finally broke with its Al Qaeda heritage and began walking a path of its own devise. Hence forth, ISIS developed a quasi-state structure, in which the underground structures of the past developed into a full-grown administration, which in its apex presided over 8 000 000 souls.¹⁵ Local councils morphed into local administration and internal security structures transformed into a security apparatus, a secret police and religious policing forces.

The defeats, sustained by Daesh, as well as the lost territories represented a series of new challenges to the existence of the jihadists group. They were met by following the long-established modus operandi. Faced with insuperable resistance, the Islamic state chose to degrade its structure back to the underground level which functioned prior to 2013. The length of deconstruction of the existing administrative segments depended on the amount of pressure, exercised over ISIS in the specific instance. Thus, in areas with more successful ant-terrorist operations, IS degraded further back to a n even earlier stage, while in zones with less pressure, the jihadists maintain low profile, but retained their mid-level organization. The overall meaning of this process is simple – survive, adapt, regrow.¹⁶

Once stabilized at a certain level of structuring, ISIS begins a slow and steady process of restructuring and regrouping. Regarding the scale of Coalition engagement in the past two years, ISIS has chosen to maintain a low profile, operating on a cellar level in the separate provinces, often not forming a regional or provincial structure in order to avert attention. The process of restructuring often interacts with the development of underground organizations, forming in the aftermath of the expulsion of the jihadists from their territorial strongholds. Based on the absence of power in the newly liberated areas and the overall uncertainty about the business, trade and rebuilding, local gangs and criminal networks step in to take over trafficking, smuggling and illicit trade. A substantial part of these networks has sought

15 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45547595>

16 P. Rayan, P. Johnston – After Mosul, get ready for the Islamic state to go underground (<https://warontherocks.com/2016/10/after-the-battle-for-mosul-get-ready-for-the-islamic-state-to-go-underground/>)

protection and support by a variety of paramilitary groups, operating under governmental supervision in both Syria and Iraq. Most of these are funded and trained by Iran, either the PMU (People Mobilization Units) in Iraq, or the number of militias in the so-called National Defense Forces (NDF) in Syria. Many of these paramilitary forces and criminal gangs try to duplicate ISIS in the manner of infiltrating and taking over local territories and dominating the illegal trade in certain regions.

Thus, for example, the former rebel areas in the province of Dara'a in Syria are now contested by five separate groups, struggling for control over drugs and weapons trade – Hezbollah, the 4th division, 5th corps, the Tigers and the militias loyal to the military intelligence service and the Airforce intelligence service. The situation in Iraq is more or less the same and all in all, things in the Middle East much resemble what is happening in Venezuela with its Cartel of the Suns¹⁷ In the near future, ISIS will either fight these criminal structures for control or will make deals with and probably incorporate part of them. In the meantime, we can expect a series of short- and long-term deals to be made between the jihadists, the criminals and the paramilitary structures. It is quite possible that state actors will also be involved in the process.

THE NETWORK

ISIS has already begun to show signs of revitalizing its network in both Syria and Iraq. During the past year, IS has carried out a substantial number of attacks against a multitude of targets in the said countries.¹⁸ For the past 15 months, there have been an average of 8 attacks per day with a different scale of intensity. Such a statistic is in a sharp contrast with the notion of a defeated and broken terrorist organization.

17 The Cartel of the Suns is an illegal structure, which involves both mafia leaders and political and military figures in Venezuela. For a well written account, see - <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/drug-trafficking-venezuelan-regime-cartel-of-the-sun/>

18 According to [a BBC investigation](#), between January 2018 and March 2019, ISIS has carried out 1767 attacks in Iraq and 1124 in Syria. According to the jihadists' media Nawa, between July 2018 and March 2019, IS has been responsible for 1395 attacks in Iraq and 966 in Syria.

A number of reports on Iraq have pointed that ever since the end of 2017, ISIS began to reestablish their network in Iraq, building upon the pre-existing structures, which were not adequately uprooted by the authorities. What is troubling is that the jihadists are using a copy of their previous version, achieving the same level of success without being countered by any meaningful measures on the government's behalf.

The wide spread corruption and the lack of adequate authority are a further bonus for the jihadists in their task of regrouping and re-growing. At present, the IS have reinstalled their structures in the provinces of Anbar, Ninawa, Salahuddin and Diyala, and have also infiltrated Kirkuk and the zones around the Bagdad perimeter.¹⁹ Their network links a series of settlements, hidden bases and caves and functions on the basis of a well-established practice, tested between 2008 and 2014. In certain parts of the above-mentioned provinces, ISIS have an actual grip on the hinterland of several settlements. There is also a dramatic increase in the number of kidnappings and assassinations of local leaders and strongmen – both secular and religious.

In the second half of 2018, the ISIS network began spreading south. Jihadists began returning to key cities like Tikrit, Samara, Fallujah and Ramadi. In 2019, their attacks began to spread further south to Makhmudia and Madain. From a strategic standpoint, IS's leadership seeks to establish a string of positions around the Iraqi capital – a clear sign that the organization will try to repeat its campaign from 2014. In addition, similar rings of strongholds are being established around Kirkuk and Mosul.

In Syria, ISIS maintains its strong presence in the desert areas of the provinces of Deir ez Zor and Swayda in the Palmyra-Swayda-Deir ez Zor triangle, sometimes referred as Badiya. In recent months, the jihadist were able to transfer troops from Baghuz to Swayda, capitalizing on corrupted militia leaders and the government turning a blind eye in order to later use the jihadist treat against the local Druze population. A recent investigation has shown that no less than 1 500 ISIS members, well armed and battle

¹⁹ <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-re-establishes-historical-sanctuary-iraq>

ready, have been transferred though government held areas.²⁰ Further proof of continuous jihadist presence is exacerbated in the form of constant attacks against SDF and Assad forces along the Euphrates – from Baghouz to Manbij. In two separate attacks, more than 20 Kurdish and government soldiers have been massacred by mechanized machinegun squads, which, strike out of nowhere and then disappear in to the wilderness.

In Syria, ISIS continues to rely on close ties with several Bedouin tribes and clans, living along the Euphrates river in the provinces of Raqqah and Deir ez Zor, as well as in Hassakah. Popular unrest against the harsh treatment of Arabs by the new Kurd administration are quickly prompting pro-ISIS sentiments, which the jihadist will certainly capitalize on. The same goes for government held areas, where mismanagement, corruption and illegal activities by pro-Assad militias, back by Iran and Russia will certainly backfire, strengthening the Islamic state. Further aid is provided by the timely restructuring of the provinces in Syria, which has been carried out in 2018. The new structure is far more flexible, sacrificing centralization for autonomy and adaptability. In addition, new practices and experience in rebuilding will certainly be brought in from Iraq.

„THE SINEWS OF WAR ARE INFINITE MONEY“

As in any other venture, the establishment, maintenance and reestablishment of the jihadist network demands funding. Between 2014 and 2016, ISIS was at the height of its financial power and was able to extract such a quantity of funds, that its annual budget could match the military spending of countries as big as Romania. Just from selling of petrol, IS was able to make over \$1 500 000 a day.²¹ In the following years, this income has been reduced but not removed.²² Furthermore, the jihadist were able to transfer their operations toward other parts of the world and establish a global illicit network, the funding from which can be redistributed to support

20 Sarah Hunaidi – ISIS Has Not Been Defeated. It's Alive and Well in Southern Syria. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/03/isis-has-not-been-defeated-its-alive-and-well-in-southern-syria/>)

21 <https://www.ft.com/content/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a#axzz3rhwAkkfP>

22 <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/10/oil-extortion-still-paying-off-for-isis.html>

the ongoing effort in Iraq and Syria. In this aspect, structural decentralization has actually helped maintaining the center.

ISIS continues to earn millions from their participation in drug and people trafficking, smuggling, weapons and antiques trade etc. Simultaneously, the group has been able to slip a substantial amount of money from Iraq and Syria and to transfer these funds to safe locations. Between July 2017 and July 2018, IS was able to extract over \$400 000 000 out of Iraq and Syria.²³ In the aftermath, the jihadists were able to reinvest a substantial part of these funds back into the Iraqi economy – an estimated \$250 000 000, laundered through carwashes, pharmacies, fast food diners, currency exchange offices and car repair facilities. The people managing these ventures were either part of the informal ISIS network or were in business relations with the jihadists.²⁴ After being laundered, the funds earn profit and go back to the pockets of ISIS investors, in return funding the purchase of guns, munitions and explosives.

In Syria, where the territorial fragmentation is much more obvious than in Iraq, local powerholders have been unable to establish a strong and working control over trade, movement of goods and people and the transfer of money. While legal business is not as profitable as in Iraq, ISIS is capitalizing on more brutal forms of extraction – kidnappings, smuggling, traffic of goods, weapons, drugs, people and antiquities. Turkey has also proven to be a good option for the terrorists' business activities, regardless of several counterterrorist ops, carried out by the authorities. Through Turkey, ISIS can tap in the European illicit market, using a complex system of intermediaries.

23 R. Mansur – „ISIS Inc.“ (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/16/isis-inc-islamic-state-iraq-syria/>)

24 Ibid.

Apart from its material form of illicit trade, criminal capitalism is expanded through a system of informal banking, which has developed in the Middle Ages, based on the Islamic *ummah*. The term describing this system is *hawala* and it has been known to scholars for a long.²⁶ The core of this system is based on money transfer via intermediaries, without money traveling any real distance. A man in Damascus (Mr. A), for example, decides to send money to an associate, operating in Kabul (Mr. B). Mr. A finds a trustworthy intermediary in Damascus, requests a transfer of \$1 000 000 to Kabul and gives him a slightly higher sum (the intermediary keeping a “fee”). The Intermediary sends word to a friend of his own in Kabul, saying that one Mr. B will come asking for \$1 000 000 and that these funds must be given to him. The intermediary in Kabul, trusting his friend back in Syria, will lend Mr. B the money, no questions asked. The debt between the two intermediaries will be settled later, without attracting unnecessary attention from the authorities. Since these are contacts between illegal structures, the hawala will include more than one set of intermediaries, so that the path of the funds become almost untraceable. In the end, since no physical transfer of money is made, and no accountability is provided from the intermediaries (*hawaladar*), the money can hardly be followed. Prestige and trust are the most valuable assets in these operations. Losing trust means cutting all ties and losing all clients.

Based on the untraceable hawala funds and the infiltration of the local economy (both legal and illicit), the Islamic state is establishing a lucrative transnational network, which can finance all the operations and attacks, carried out by the jihadists across the globe. Money buy guns, munition, explosives and provisions. They also buy mercenaries and military instructors such as Malhama Tactical – a Jihadi-orientated private military company, offering training to insurgents, terrorists and the sort.²⁷ In addition to military cooperation, funds also buy the services of a network of hackers,

26 Р. Трад – „Как радикални групи използват древна банкова система, за да се финансират“ (R. Trad – How radical groups use an ancient banking system to finance themselves) (<https://www.vesti.bg/sviat/radikalni-grupi-izpolzvat-drevna-bankova-sistema-6079184>)

²⁷ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/10/the-world-first-jihadi-private-military-contractor-syria-russia-malhama-tactical/>

Internet provocateurs and “trolls”, which use a wide variety of techniques in order to promote “the caliphate” – from attacking servers to designing elaborate infographics in order to cow enemies and inspire followers.

The issue of whether the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has been eliminated, received a firm answer from both independent experts and the US authorities. The jihadists, even if beaten badly, are neither broken nor extinct. Their tumor-like network continues to spread across the Middle East in the fertile soil of corruption, state irresponsibility and sectarian tensions. Existing local and regional conflicts add additional strain to the existing social order, opening the hearts and minds of the population to ISIS propaganda. While experts have a clear sense of why the resurgence of ISIS is happening, so far no one has provided an adequate answer of how to prevent it and uproot jihadism from these troubled lands. As for the question posed in the title of this article – whether ISIS are coming back to Syria and Iraq, the answer is simple – they never left.

THE ADVENT OF THE DIGITAL MERCENARIES



Dr. Kiril Avramov is a post-doctoral fellow at the Intelligence Studies Project at the University of Texas at Austin. He is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Department of Political Science and former Vice-Rector of the New Bulgarian University in Sofia and a former Senior Fulbright Visiting

Researcher at CREEES, UT Austin, Texas.

The topic²⁸ of use and role of private military contractors in modern warfare periodically gains the intensive focus of public attention and scholarly scrutiny. It happens so, due either to highly publicized lobbying efforts of the proponents of private military and security companies' (PMSC) wider implementation in long-running conflicts, such as the recent "Prince plan" for Afghanistan, or highly publicized operations of increasingly assertive non-Western PMSC's, such as the likes of the Russian "Wagner".

The scrutiny focus and intensity are justified and rightfully so, as the expanding role of the private military contractors represents a key feature of the rapidly evolving nature of modern warfare. However, while the public attention tends to be captured mainly by the kinetic operations performed by the modern day "condottieri", a new type of modern "soldiers of fortune" emerges center stage. Namely, the ascent of a new breed, one that could be best described as "digital mercenaries". The advent of these new professionals is of no less importance than their "traditional" counterparts who provide muscle and boots on the ground in distant and difficult environments. Provided the current state of accelerated technological development,

²⁸ Republish with the author's special permission. The original version - <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/advent-digital-mercenaries>

relentless international race for artificial intelligence dominance coupled with profound global uncertainty marked by increasing “gray zone” cyber activities intensity renders their rise to prominence, as an inevitable.

In fact, these new “cyber soldiers and spies” for hire and their respective operations in benefit of their clients will probably become the permanent new norm, rather than a series of occasional and fairly rare episodes of obscure nature. They will also certainly make a profound mark in the field of traditional nation-state intelligence performance and cooperation, as well. The existing global structural preconditions certainly provide a fertile environment for such privatized actors to proliferate and gain even further importance. The process of their expansion, however, raises virtually similar ethical, political, economic and regulatory issues and concerns comparable to their “traditional” PMSC’s counterparts.

HACKERS FOR HIRE

These problems are best illustrated by the recent revelations stemming from the excellent Reuters investigation regarding the so-called “Project Raven” in support of the expanding UAE signals intelligence efforts via employment of American ex-NSA personnel. It could be argued that this particular case of hiring of the new type of “digital mercenaries” is an industry inflection point. It also exhibits all of the spectrum of issues of concern, while serving as a precursor of the upcoming trends in the cyber contracting trade. While the transfer of cutting-edge “defensive” cyber and surveillance technology and hardware to well-resourced nation-states in process of defense and intelligence capacity building is not a new phenomenon, the transfer of skills and personnel definitely is. Especially, when it comes to provision of intelligence training and actual application of personnel skills and technology in benefit of foreign intelligence services.

And yet, this is precisely what the initial “Project Raven” and subsequent “DarkMatter” projects were all about, where U.S. personnel was allegedly tasked with helping their Emirati colleagues and managers in their efforts of surveillance of governments, militants and dissidents deemed dangerous by

the UAE ruling class. After at least five years of cooperation between an American based company and UAE's National Electronic Security Authority, the whistle was blown after an American employee of the contractor raised her concerns about the practice of targeting of U.S. persons designated by the Emirati project management. In essence, the "thin, red line" was crossed, when the American ex-government intelligence employees were troubled to discover that the ever-expanding list of targets supplied by the Emirati management was not limited to foreign governments and terrorist-related individuals and groups only.

It allegedly also included a separate "white category" designated for American citizens, besides the already existing country "color" categories, such as Iran and Yemen. Apparently, the target list has featured the designation of other Westerners, in addition to prominent Emirati human rights activists.

VENTURING INTO THE DARKMATTER

It should be noted, this particular case is not isolated in terms of highly-intrusive surveillance and targeting technology transfer and implementation from the West to other governments worldwide, as the recent research of University of Toronto's Citizen Lab demonstrates, where the Israeli NSO company's Pegasus flagship product was tracked in use by multiple governments with less-than-stellar human rights records with quite significant geographical reach. Similar was the story of the FinFisher toolset sold by the British-German Gamma International, as well as the one of their Italian rivals of "Hacking team" with their Remote Control System spyware.

Despite these companies' denials regarding the intent of use of their respective products and services, namely defensive purposes, the evidence points out that they are overwhelmingly used in offensive operations that routinely target civil society among various other targets. These stories are a vivid illustration of the fact, that in the field of contemporary cyber warfare it becomes increasingly hard to clearly distinguish between offensive and purely defensive operations, as they frequently overlap in similar to

traditional PMSC's operations fashion. They also illustrate the potential political problems that the use of regular and cyber contractors creates in regard with respective national foreign policy objectives different governments pursue.

While the general overlap of Western and client governments' objectives, such as tracking and neutralizing terror groups for instance, renders the contractors of both kinds as beneficial assets, the diverging internal policy agenda of authoritarian regimes turns the foreign hires into liabilities for their home governments. While the general overlap exists, when the number of suppliers increase and diversifies, there is no iron-clad guarantee that at certain point the service providers will not cross knowingly or involuntarily the policies of their home governments, as they cannot exercise control over the agenda of their hosts, as visible in the case of "Project Raven". In similar vein, it also offers ample international criticism "munition" to all kinds of different state and non-state actors and groups motivated to scrutinize and object the Western foreign and security policies agenda.

In addition, in the case of the "digital spies" for hire, inevitably the host institution or government will be inclined to tap into the hired personnel's specific knowledge, professional networks and familiarity with classified information in their previous line of government duty. In worst case scenario, the hosts will seek to gain leverage over the hired personnel for own respective purpose. As the pace of digital innovation frantically speeds up, it becomes rather obvious that the suppliers' market overcrowds and not every vendor will be able to sell its digital products and services only to its own respective government. Ample evidence in this regard is supplied by the issues surrounding the exports by some of the industry leaders, such as the leading companies from the Israeli cyber sector.

The relentless pursuit of profit coupled with the inability to overcome home market monopsony leads scores of these companies to sell their products and services directly or via intermediaries to governments and agencies previously designated, as off-limits. Open question remains if and when the beneficial end-users decide to use the technology supplied for purposes different than anti-terror, in pursuit of commercial competitive advantage for

home-grown champions or industrial espionage against their competitors for instance. Finally, come the regulatory concerns regarding the licensing and effective control execution by the U.S. and other Western governments dealing with such “digital mercenary” operations that are not confined to technology transfer alone, but also involve employment of former national intelligence personnel overseas.

Again, as the situational complexity surrounding this novel trend of employing foreign hired intelligence personnel is rather high. Despite the existence of well-developed American legal corpus dealing with export and transfer of military goods and services abroad, the incidents involving licensing of cyber know-how and capabilities in benefit of foreign intelligence service suggest that there might be gaps or at least a room for improvement in the existing legal base. Same seems to apply for the other respective Western governments that deal with such cyber outfits that operate in foreign environments. Indeed, the complexity and context vary widely, as the burgeoning private sector demand for specific skills and services pertaining to intrusion and influence operations is clearly on a rise. Such conclusion could be inferred by the cases of the now-defunct third party intelligence operators, such as Cambridge Analytica and PSY Group that have employed certain amount of cyber and traditional tradecraft in benefit to their private clients with significant amount of loud public controversy.

Finally, in parallel to the myriad of issues and problems in the past twenty-five years that have surrounded the emergence and subsequent maturity of the private military industry worldwide, the advent of the new kind of private digital warriors and spies closely mirrors these traditional concerns. For governments and regulators concerned, it would probably be best, if the lessons learned in the process of standardization of the PMSC industry be applied and thus some of the worst failures avoided in timely fashion.

A GLIMPSE BEYOND THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

Ventsislav Bozhev

Without any doubts, the rapid development of the social networks for the last 10 years, have made huge impact over the political processes globally. More and more politicians use platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Tweeter to communicate more easily with their voters, partners or opponents. One of the politicians who take great advantage of these opportunities is the American president Donald Trump. He needed only one sentence to successfully change the long-standing American policy of his predecessors on a delicate issue such as the status of the strategically important Golan heights. Less than 240 characters were more than enough for Trump to announce that *“After 52 years it is time for the United States to fully recognize Israel’s Sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which is of critical strategic importance to the State of Israel and Regional Stability!”*²⁹ The recognition itself happened just a few days later through an official proclamation signed in the presence of the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had come in Washington specially for the occasion.

Of course, this decision wasn’t based on emotions, but it was a well-thought move, which came at a crucial moment just two weeks before the parliamentary elections in Israel where Mr. Netanyahu had to lead a hard fight to maintain his position for another four years.

THE CASE

The Golan Heights is an area spanning about 1800 square km. along the borders of Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. After the Six-Day war of 1967 the Israeli army occupied roughly 2/3 of its territory imposing full control over it. The Heights have great importance, because of their direct link with the Sea of Galilee and the nearby water sources vital to Israel’s water supply. They are also significant from a military point of view giving full strategic

²⁹ President Trump: It’s time to ‘fully recognize’ Israeli sovereignty over Golan, 21.03.2019, <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/president-trump-its-time-to-fully-recognise-israeli-sovereignty-over-golan/>

control over the border. Before 1967 the Syrian army often used the comfort of the high ground to shell settlements deep inside Israel. Nowadays, IDF uses the heights in a similar manner to observe Southwestern Syria all the way to Damascus 60 km. from there.

In 1981 the conservative government of then prime minister Menachem Begin formally annexed the disputed territory by a special law, which legally applied Israeli jurisdiction and sovereignty over it. The international community firmly rejected the act and determined as null and void by United Nations Security Council Resolution 497.³⁰ Of course this was not an obstacle for the Israeli state, which still treats the annexed land as an administrative part of the Northern District.

However, the case has been a subject of direct and indirect negotiations between Israel and Syria several times. The main idea behind the talks was the so called "*land for peace*" principle promoted by the UN which stipulates return of occupied territory in exchange for a peace treaty and recognition of the Israeli state. Ultimately, the negotiation process proved to be unsuccessful, and since the beginning of the war in Syria in 2011, the whole case remains frozen.

THE ELECTIONS

Of course, it was more than obvious, that the main purpose of Mr. Trump's decision was to give support to his ally during the election campaign. In a very delicate moment just a few weeks after the Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announced his intention to indict Netanyahu in three different corruption cases for bribery, breach of trust and fraud. And even though the final decision on indictment will only take place after a hearing three months after the elections, the whole story casted a shadow over the campaigning and even the political future of Netanyahu.

Moreover, Netanyahu's name was involved in another scandal related to multi-million arms deals with Germany about the sale of submarines and

³⁰ Resolution 497 (1981), [https://undocs.org/S/RES/497\(1981\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/497(1981))

naval vessel in which Egypt takes part as well. The scandal itself formed large part of the campaigning against Netanyahu from his main political opponents namely Benny Gantz, Moshe Ya'alon and Yair Lapid. According to the leaked information, the prime minister had been behind a massive graft scheme involving high ranking Israeli officials, that benefitted personally from three deals about the purchase of four Dolphyn-class submarines and four Sa'ar 6-class corvettes from German shipbuilder ThyssenKrupp.

A separate fourth deal about two submarines and two anti-submarine warships was completed between Egypt and ThyssenKrupp. The problem here is that Netanyahu has had shares in American company that sold steel and technologies to ThyssenKrupp, which afterwards were used for the completion of the submarines for Egypt. In this relation Netanyahu benefitted by green-lighting Germany for the deal without any consultations with then Chief of the General Staff of IDF Benny Gantz and the Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon.³¹

It will hardly be clear soon whether all these accusations against Netanyahu are true or not. In any case, however, it is certain that his name wasn't involved in a scandal for the first time and his contradictory image once again threatened his political career. And at this very moment the cavalry arrived.

President Trump's decision reaffirmed the political consensus in Israel, which is united behind the notion that Golan Heights must remain Israeli soil at all costs. Especially in the context of the Iranian advancement in Syria and the resulting direct security threads for Israel. Netanyahu himself has always stood firmly behind this line as well as Benny Gantz and all the other opposition parties. But here comes the tricky part. Only the incumbent prime minister can possibly derive political benefits from the American recognition. And so, he did. Netanyahu successfully promoted it as his personal achievement and the result of his strong ties with Donald Trump. A diplomatic breakthrough, that brought him some bonus points for the elections.

³¹ Though Germany does not need Israeli permission to sell arms, based on their special relations and together with the USA and other ally countries, it has shown that courtesy in order to maintain Jerusalem's qualitative edge in the region.

THE BIG PICTURE

Without any doubt Mr. Trump has achieved some positive outcomes in the short-term helping his strategic ally to stay in power. After all, Netanyahu is the man with whom the Americans have been negotiating the possible game-changing deal regarding the Middle East Peace Process.

But the picture might not look so positive from another perspective. Above all, it should be noted that the unilateral American recognition doesn't entail any changes in the international law. The UN, the international community or even the closest American partners from EU and NATO rejected the decision of President Trump. In other words, at least for now, the Golan Heights will continue to be considered as an occupied territory.

A very important part of the whole puzzle is the position of the Arab countries. In the weeks or months following the Israeli elections, the team of Jared Kushner is expected to announce the long-prepared plan about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Middle East Peace Process. A plan that needs the approval and the support of the Arab countries in order to be legitimate. And decisions such as this for the Golan Heights make this support very questionable. Simply because from the Arab point of view the Americans just give away Arab land without any dialogue.

Of course, there is a possible hypothesis that the recognition of the annexation and the last year's recognition of Jerusalem as an Israeli capital, might have been used as a bargain chip in the process of negotiating the peace plan. The United States support these two strands in exchange for more concessions from the Israeli side regarding the Palestinians. This can't be confirmed yet or at least not before the plan is revealed. A plan that Mr. Trump would expect to be his major achievement as a president – “the deal of the century”.

The ironic here is that there is hardly even one Arab leader (except Bashar Assad) who is opposing the Israeli annexation. At least for now the presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria is much more dangerous for them than the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights. After all this territory has never been considered as part of the Palestinian cause and it will never be anything more

than territorial conflict between Israel and Syria. However, no Arab leader would ever admit such statement. Or at least not publicly.

And that's why at the Arab League summit in Tunis all of them slammed the US decision in a final declaration that said it "*affirmed that the Golan is occupied Syrian territory according to international law, the decisions of the United Nations and the Security Council*".³² But apart from this relatively angry declaration, there weren't any other significant consequences following the Arab summit.

The controversial decision of President Trump will also in no way help the improvement of relations with Turkey, which considers the Syrian territorial integrity as a particularly delicate issue. Especially in the context of the Astana process. Against the backdrop of Washington's support for the Syrian Kurds, the American refusal to extradite the cleric Fethullah Gülen, the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem as well as the recent presence of Secretary Mike Pompeo at a conference between Israel, Greece and Cyprus (considered in Ankara as anti-Turkish), the Trump administration's recognition of the annexation will become yet another issue in the already tense relations between the two NATO allies.

In a typical style, the Turkish President Erdogan has already used the Trump's decision to derive political dividends for himself both domestically and internationally. Domestically just a few days prior to the local elections and internationally in the context of his ambitions to emerge as a leader of the Islamic world.

³² Arab League rejects US recognition of Israeli control over Golan Heights, 31.03.2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190331-arab-summit-expected-reject-usa-decision-golan-heights-israel>

WHAT ABOUT RUSSIA?

Finally, we have Russia. All American mistakes in the Middle East over the last decade combined with the mismanagement of conflicts, have given enough space to Russia to raise as a major regional factor, that can hardly be sidestepped. And this case is also an example.

The reaction in Moscow, as expected, was negative and according to the official position of the Russian Foreign Ministry the actions of the American administration are *“another manifestation of Washington’s disregard for international law, UN Security Council resolutions, the principle of land for peace, developed during the Madrid Peace Conference co-sponsored by Russia and the United States, and the Arab Peace Initiative.”*³³

Disregard of international law, said from a state, that brutally occupied and annexed sovereign Ukrainian territory, sounds cynically to say at least. And in this sense, the Russian ability to take advantage of such precedents should not be underestimated. In a similar way Moscow used Kosovo to justify its intervention in Georgia and the following separation of Abkhazia and North Osetia. And when the time comes President Putin will hardly hesitate to use the Golan Heights as an argument supporting the annexation of Crimea.

The Golan Heights case weakens the position of those opposing the Crimean annexation and will certainly give more space for Moscow to maneuver when it comes to debating with the EU regarding sanctions. A common question without any doubt will be *“If the world decided to impose sanctions on Russia over Crimea, then why nobody is sanctioning Israel or the United States?”*

As for Syria, Trump administration’s actions might give Iran and Hezbollah enough legitimacy of their claims in Syria. It would be easy for them to promote their military presence close to the Israeli border as the only existing

³³ Комментарий Департамента информации и печати МИД России в связи с намерением США признать суверенитет Израиля над Голанскими высотами, 22.03.2019, http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3583239

resistance against “*the Jewish occupiers*”. Something that is not a desire in Moscow. After all, the Russians invested a lot of effort to reduce the tension in Southwestern Syria, helping the UN peacekeepers to restore the patrols along the 1973 ceasefire line.

CONCLUSION

The recognition of the Golan Heights annexation neither alters the status of the territory in international law nor does it change dramatically the situation on ground. A symbolic act simply confirming the reality, which everybody has already accepted. But the Trump’s decision is also a provocation, that in the long term has a potential to erode the US leading role in the Syrian peace process and its position as a major player in the Middle East. Such actions provide Vladimir Putin with opportunities to make himself look like fairer, more consistent and respecting the international law mediator.

Russia's Youth Strategy for Syria³⁴

Kiril Avramov, Ruslan Trad

When discussing Moscow's role in the Syrian conflict, much of the public and scholarly attention is squarely focused on the multiple dimensions of Russian "hard power" and exercise of brute force and rightfully so. Thus, relatively under scrutinized remains the quest for strategic influence through "soft power" exploits that aims to cement Moscow's role in Damascus and adjacent Middle Eastern capitals for extended period. Russian "heavy metal" diplomacy might be the preeminent tool when it comes to Syria, however we would argue that the skillful use of other "softer" instrumentation in pursuit of strong clout and leverage is equally important.

This specific instrumentation that leaves a serious imprint on the development of the bilateral ties between Russia and Syria, includes the exploitation of increasingly pro-active Russian charities, non-governmental organizations and committees focused on broader Middle East and Syria in particular. Among the many commonalities shared between these "soft power" instruments, in terms of structure, personnel, ideology and modus operandi, that include the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, "RUSSAR" Charitable Fund, "Combat Brotherhood" nation-wide veteran organization and the Committee for Solidarity with Libyan and Syrian Peoples, one particularly stands out and deserves a special attention.

Namely, all these structures zero in and focus part of their foreign activities on the next generation of young Syrians. The younger generation becomes prime propaganda target, as this vulnerable segment of the Syrian population could be heavily influenced and successfully co-opted in the vast wider Russian strategic influence architecture in the Middle East.

³⁴ An edited version was published in EA World View <https://eaworldview.com/2019/02/russia-youth-strategy-syria/>

WORKING IN CONCERT TO PROMOTE GLOBAL “ORDERISM”

As mentioned above, all the Russian charities and non-governmental organizations engaged in activities in Syria do share multiple commonalities, as they have similar ideological load, comparable structure and overlapping memberships of their key personnel. They also do have very close ties to Russian military and intelligence structures and aim for increasingly expanding international influence and exposure. All their key senior people hail similar biographies shaped mainly by their experiences in the ranks of Soviet nomenklatura, diplomatic corps, foreign intelligence or the military.

All of them export post-Soviet state-backed propaganda abroad, heavily influenced by the ideas of Russian political and religious messianic global mission, as well as what could be best described as “orderism” -i.e. new state quasi-ideology that values sovereignty, stability and preservation of “patriotism, traditional gender roles, Orthodox Christianity and military strength...” When it comes to Syria, all of them seem to work in concert and in close coordination in disseminating humanitarian aid, but also information via academic lectures, high-profile conferences, art expositions and academic and school delegation exchanges. In addition, they support Russian language education, implementation of school programs, as well as Assad regime’s veterans and veteran’s family support.

Their respective activities cover a wide spectrum ranging from religious to language education and patriotic indoctrination that overlap with contemporary different facets Russian foreign policy. Thus, these organizations are linked directly with Kremlin via multiple structural and personal channels and enjoy its full support, as they function as a virtual extension of Russian diplomacy. They also act as the Russian state’s quasi-official ideological arm when dealing with Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese youth, students and intellectuals, as they are multifunctional platforms that allow for simultaneous interaction in Syria and its neighbors and in Russia both, where ideas are disseminated among local and Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese ex-pats and exchange students.

These platforms allow for the cooptation and absorption of older Syrian and other Middle Eastern ex-pat networks and mixed marriage families in Russia and Syria that were built in the seventies of the past century, when scores of Middle Eastern students were dispatched to study in the U.S.S.R.

Another very important functionality of such platforms is the ability for representatives of circles close to Assad, such as the Khoury brothers, to be coopted within the ranks of the contemporary Russian elite and receive additional legitimacy and an opportunity for close networking. Something quite important, especially when such people are targeted by international sanctions and their ability to execute financial transactions and travel freely in Europe is severely limited.

As a bonus, platforms, such as the “RUSSAR” Charitable Fund allow for execution of parallel “unofficial” diplomacy that aids the official Russian efforts in Syria and the broader Middle East, as in the case of the blitz-visits of the head of “RUSSAR” in Tehran or endorsement and promotion of Hezbollah’s profile and role in Syria.

A SPECIAL INSTRUMENT FOR SYNERGY

As the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society is Kremlin’s main device for religious diplomacy and is a “heavy duty” instrument, current runner-up that gains most attention with its energetic activity and cooperative approach is “RUSSAR”. A charity, that was set up in response of 2014 “tragic events” and named in abbreviation of Russia and Syrian Arab Republic was established by Russian and dual Syrian citizens with varied professional profiles, ranging from career ex-diplomats to financial entrepreneurs.

Headed by Oleg Fomin, a seasoned former diplomat who has been the director of the Soviet cultural center in Syria from 1969 to 1975 and representative of the Russian center for international scientific and cultural liaisons at the government of the Russian Federation in Tunisia and Egypt from 1994 to 2006, who also is co-chairing the Committee for Solidarity with Libyan and Syrian Peoples and high-profile member of the Imperial Orthodox

Palestine Society, the charity is tightly connected to certain segments of the Russian political establishment via its board's member the former deputy chairman of the Duma, Sergey Baburin.

The charity's board include the Russian ex-ambassador to Syria Alexander Zotov, as well as the humanitarian projects coordinator of the "Combat Brotherhood" Nelly Kuskova. It is also financially backed by the dual citizens of Russia and Syria, brothers Mudallal and Imad Khoury, who were minority owners of the US sanctioned Tempbank that was executing financial transactions on behalf of Assad regime and in connection with gas and oil trade with Iran.

The charity is a primer for a special purpose "soft power" influence instrument that offers platform for synergy between all of the major stakeholders of Russian foreign policy, such as the *siloviki*, the Orthodox and the old-school Soviet diplomats and spies, that incorporates key topics of "orderism" designated for global export from Donbass to Damascus, and allows for client regimes' representatives inclusion and utilization.

It also has a special focus on projects involving young people and intellectuals, as it aims to shape the future Syrian civilian and military elite. Thus, it stays close to important sources of local information that augments the intelligence gathering efforts and allows its experienced operatives to keep their fingers on the pulse of local events, while detecting and capturing evolving public moods. In other words, "RUSSAR" is seeking returns on a long-term investment strategy under the veil of humanitarian aid provision, veterans' families assistance and defense of Christian heritage in Syria.

CURATING A MYTH

Somewhere around 2012–13, when the Syrian protest wave was already taking on the fearsome and ugly face of a civil war, the sympathizers of the Syrian regime began to share an image of Bashar Assad as a defender of the Syrian nation. In the image shared, Assad is in armor, confronting the enemies who are conspiring against his government, enemies that include

the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia and scores of others. Using the motives of St George's story, Assad's armored image was used by the regime's propaganda and circulated mainly by young people, to suggest that without Assad heading of the country, the Christian population not only in Syria, but also in the whole Middle East would be threatened.

Such tactics were meant to state not only to the Syrian people, but also to the world that Assad was needed, and the opposition was discredited. From Bulgaria through Western Europe and Russia, the Syrian communities were gradually splitting, and the pro-Assad groups were created to claim, recycle and repeat from the television screens and websites virtually the same. Namely, the myth that the lone defender of the weak and the Sacred lands is Bashar Assad.

That obviously had its effect, as it could be seen from the pictures in Damascus taken at the traditional Christmas procession in 2018, where along with the crosses and icons, the "armored Knight" image could be spotted. The myth continued a life on its own, but this story got serious impetus thanks to one of the Allies of the Syrian regime—Moscow. The spread and careful maintenance and propagation of the myth was due to the myriad activities executed by wide network of news outlets, charities and foundations, such as "RUSSAR" and the "Combat Brotherhood".

Another signature method associated with these charities to indoctrinate and spread myths, is the de novo establishment and "historical recycling" of so-called "youth camps" for "patriotic education" based on the rich Soviet tradition and thriving on the process of ever growing militarization of children and youth in Putin's Russia.

These camps also provide the perfect opportunity to indoctrinate, shape and mold the future "defenders of the *Russkii mir*", while bonding them with their peers from "Novorossiia", Belarus, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Syria. These camps serve the purpose of indoctrinating the next generation of Putin's version of "orderism" loyalists, in a peculiar program of winning hearts and minds at a fairly early age. This program is a just a partial reflection of

the fact that Russia does not have short-term interest in Syria and the Middle East only.

Quite on the contrary, as Moscow's serious efforts are related to establishing a lasting presence and expanding the so-called "Russian World", which so far covers Eastern Europe and parts of Central Asia only. Like other cases, where he took an example from the Russian Empire, Putin sees the Middle East as a natural extension of Russian interests. And while the use of hard military power, mercenaries, such as the infamous "Wagner group" and the maintenance of local paramilitary structures are important strategic elements, probably the most important element from strategic long-term influence perspective is the maintenance of a tight grip over the youth, who represent the next generation of elites in their respective countries, Syria including.

OUR MAIN CONCERN — IT IS THE PEOPLE

Thus, in July 2015, the Crimea Peninsula will become once again important, but for a reason that will not receive broad coverage unlike its occupation by the Kremlin. In the area close to Donuzlav—once the deepest Crimean lake turned into a bay by the Soviet authorities in 1961, a regular youth summer camp was organized by the Russian combat veteran's national organization "Combat brotherhood". So far nothing novel, if we discount the symbolism of the camp's chosen location, namely the one used in 2006 and 2007 pro-Russian nationalists and local communists' protests against the disrupted NATO annual "Sea Breeze" exercises in Ukraine.

And we discount another fact, namely that the camp has been organized with organized with Russian state's taxpayer's money in accordance with Presidential order 25.07.2014 N 243 under the official slogan of "For Russia! For Victory! For Our Great Homeland!". Also, if we ignore the membership of the colorful organization committee, ranging from Russian Federation Council's Security and Defense committee notables, well-known representatives of the separatist Donetsk and Lugansk's "People's Republics", their supporting propaganda outlets, such as the "News Front",

activists and instructors from “Anti-Maidan” movement, all the way to military veterans of Afghan and Chechen wars and a world champion of mixed martial arts and the infamous biker-gang “Night Wolves”.

So, if we ignore all the listed features, the only “real” novelty was the participation of the twenty-six-member group of children of Syrian regime loyalist veteran families for the first time in such “patriotic consciousness awakening and education enhancement” camp in Crimea. Their participation was materialized by “RUSSAR” and “Combat Brotherhood’s” joint efforts and aided by the Syrian embassy in Moscow.

As evident from the event’s pictures, young boys and girls, dressed in military fatigues under the red-star sickle and hammer flags, adorned with ribbons of St. George are engaged in scores of different activities, ranging from listening “geo-political orientation” lectures to shooting, swimming and running. They also display show prevailing mood of merriment and carelessness, as it most probably was, because the idea of this types of camps is to unite the young people under the motto “Friendship of the Peoples”—the motto that is deeply familiar to the natives of former Eastern European communist countries, proudly displayed at the entrance of the same camp.

What is not immediately evident from the official photos, however, is the content of the course load taught at the camp that includes orientation, use and manipulation of social media, explanation of the causes of “color revolutions” and methods to counter their spread, as well as basics of hand-to-hand combat and techniques of spotting “provocateurs” in large gatherings of people. As a testament to the nature of the “patriotic education” at the camp, the final resolution of the participants leaves no room for doubt.

It five concise points it reinforces participant’s full support for Russian Federations’ government policies of “consolidation” of people of “Great Russia” and the quest of all separatist entities for unification with the Federation, condemns the US, the EU and member-countries of NATO in their promotion of “color revolutions” in post-Soviet space and radically

protests the US and their allies-sponsored aggression against the Syrian people and their legitimate Assad government.

Finally, they sincerely thank the “Combat Brotherhood” for their organizing the smooth running of the camp. In sum, such patriotic youth camps have existed for quite some time in Putin’s Russia being modeled after their Soviet predecessors, however the war in Syria has presented a new opportunity for direct inclusion of Syrian children at a whole new level—something that did not happen even during Soviet times, despite the good bilateral relations between Hafez Assad’s government and Kremlin.

MARCHING TO THE FUTURE

If the inclusion of Syrian children in the youth patriotic camp back in 2015 was a novel experiment, then certain subsequent developments in Syria and on the home front in Russia, have allowed the idea to offer military training to Syrian youth to enter “standardization phase”. Thus, as of last year Russia offers military training to cadets, in augmentation of the traditional military academy education for Syrian officers offered since the fifties of XX century.

As the first group of Syrian children has arrived in Saint Petersburg to begin their studies in September of 2018, the contours of a larger idea emerge into the public limelight. One, best verbalized by the Russian senator Olga Kovitidi, who clearly expressed Russian long-term plans for full vertical integration of future military elites and their compatibility with their respective Russian peers, namely “...*We expect that in 10–15 years Syrian borders will be guarded by serviceman, that along with Russian serviceman, have received high professional training at the same school*”.

The senator’s message should be taken seriously, as she is actively involved in supporting youth patriotic camps and their auxiliary activities, as is the Syrian embassy in Moscow. In order to strengthen the process of vertical integration, Russia continues to offer camps and activities to younger Syrian children, especially for selected kids from Orthodox orphanages and children

of Assad regime's loyalist serviceman families who have died in combat, as it has done for over ten years.

This future military and civilian Syrian elite pre-selection at young age, cannot fully function without the potent "soft power" influence instrumentation of Russian charities, funds and networks on the ground, as they represent an updated and slightly improved version of their Soviet predecessors well-familiar in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

They often act, as local talent "spotters" and a "parallel transmission belt" between Moscow and Damascus in executing foreign policy and economic functions, while gathering strategic intelligence, strengthening and refurbishing the old influence networks with fresh batches of new recruits.