ISIL Has Come to the Caucasus

The Ministry of National Security (MNS) of Azerbaijan announced the detention of 26 citizens of the country who took an active part in the fighting in Syria and Iraq on the side of the "Islamic State" (IS) terrorist group. They are accused of creating and participating in illegal armed groups, providing arms and ammunition, as well as involving minors in the commission of serious crimes and other offenses. For such serious crimes the most severe punishment is stipulated - imprisonment from 20 years to life.

According to the head of the Center for Public Affairs of the Ministry of National Security of Azerbaijan Arif Babaev, it has been established that some Azerbaijani citizens were involved in the war in the Middle East a few years ago. First they were sent to Pakistan, and after training were thrown into a combat zone in Iraq and Syria. The Azerbaijani authorities are concerned that the religious extremists who have gone through war in the ranks of the IS may continue the jihad to free like-minded fanatics not only in Azerbaijan, but also in the North Caucasus and even in Central Asia. Especially because the ranks of ISIL's combat units include not only Azerbaijanis and people from the North Caucasus, but also Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Tatars.

"The countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia must treat the threat posed by the Islamic State as seriously as possible," believes Professor Alexei Malashenko, Expert of the Carnegie Moscow Center. "Many people are fighting, up to 30 thousand. They come from 80 different countries. There is even a man from Mexico. This is serious. Tensions have been ratcheted up. This is a consequence of the "Arab Spring". If the process is not stopped, then it will go on. Stopping it will not be simple either, since the IS is just the tip of the iceberg of radical Islam. Echoes of what is happening can be heard around the world - in India, Pakistan, Nigeria, etc. This threat should definitely be confronted. But the processes that are taking place in Azerbaijan and Central Asia cannot be associated with this opposition. In these states it is usually difficult to figure out exactly what is settled, and it is not uncommon for a simple clearing of the political field under the pretext of the fight against Islamic radicalism." said Alexey Malashenko in an interview with the author.

According to Malashenko the "Arab Spring", which began in 2011, sparked euphoria and false opinions that democratic processes would finally take hold in the region. "This was not the case, but things got a lot worse. There was a period of instability, of which the Islamic radicals immediately took advantage. Today they are creating military infrastructure, capturing territory. As a result, they have control of a third of Syria, and a third of Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds are leaving their homes... The question is - who is supporting the Islamic radicals?" said Malashenko. According to him, the fact is that these militants, in addition to external support, to a large extent rely on their own money, experience, and strength. They are already selling oil from the captured fields. "They have shown their capabilities, and even if their camp is bombed, they will go underground and make themselves known again." says Alexey Malashenko.

Georgia has joined the battle with the IS. Tbilisi suggested that the United States establish on its territory a training camp to train Syrian rebels to fight IS militants. This was reported by the American publication Foreign Policy, with reference to the Georgian ambassador to the United States Archil Gegeshidze. Georgia thus supposedly supports the United States in the fight against the Islamic caliphate. The publication stated that the offer was made to the Minister of Defense Chuck Hagel during his visit to Tbilisi in early September. It was then that the document was
signed, according to which Georgia became the first party outside the "core" coalition (Britain, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, Italy, Poland, and Denmark) against the terrorism of ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). Georgia is already involved in NATO operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. If Tbilisi's current proposal is accepted, Georgia will contribute to the fight against the Islamic State. In Washington, according to Foreign Policy, there is a plan to train 5000 rebels in camps in Saudi Arabia, to assist next year in the fight against extremism in Syria and Iraq. According to Archil Gegeshidze Tbilisi's proposal is being considered by Washington. The diplomat specified that the discussion is on the creation of a regional center for the fight against terrorism, which can benefit both neighboring countries, as well as "overseas partners".

According to Alexey Malashenko, Tbilisi is making the right move. "Georgia should prove its loyalty to the West. There is a certain symbolic moment: Abu Omar Shishani, who was a symbol of the Caucasian presence in Syria, hails from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia. This blemish must be washed off." said Malashenko.

Meanwhile, the Council of National Security and Crisis Management under the Prime Minister of Georgia issued a special statement in which he denied the possibility of housing training camps for Syrian rebels in its territory. Meanwhile, some other Georgian institutions confirmed the existence of a plan to create a regional anti-terrorism center or base.

Concerning the danger for the Caucasus and Central Asia posed by the Islamic State, the Kazakh political analyst Dosym Satpayev said that it all began with the common threats to the Caucasus and Central Asia as a whole. "The main efforts of the IS are currently focused on capturing the territories of Syria and Iraq. The bulk of its fighters are a motley crowd from all over the world, which helps to create the same 'caliphate' precisely in these areas. But at the same time there is information that some of the so-called 'mujahideen', having received the necessary combat experience, are returning to their countries. In particular, reports of this have come from the UK, France, and Germany. And when we talk about the possible risks for Azerbaijan, or, for example, Kazakhstan, due to the involvement of the citizens of these countries in the fighting on the side of the IS or the Taliban, the emphasis is on the fact that their return may to some extent change the balance of forces in the radical underground." Dosym Satpayev said to the author.

The political scientist noted that the return home of people with military experience may lead to the creation of new forms of associations of the various factions of radical Islam and intensify terrorist activities in general.

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