The Syrian Crisis Reaches beyond the Country

Syria’s civil war, which has turned its cities into ruins and taken the lives of more than 70,000 people, is becoming more regional and international in nature. Foreign forces are increasingly becoming involved in the struggle for power between, on one side, Bashar al-Assad’s ruling regime, which relies on Baath Party leaders, the Arab Alawite (Shiite) minority and security forces, and, on the other, the Sunni Arab majority led by the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Whereas only a few countries were involved during the conflict’s first stage (Iran supported the Assad government, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey supported the armed opposition), the war is now to some extent affecting Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and other Middle Eastern and Arab countries. Also involved in the armed conflict are various Islamic extremist and terrorist groups (the Lebanese Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian Jaish al-Shaabi, Saudi Wahhabis, al-Qaeda, and Jabhat al-Nusra, among others). Syria is increasingly becoming an arena for an armed confrontation between supporters of Sunni and Shiite Islam. The outcome of the armed struggle is largely predictable because Assad’s supporters cannot cope with the virtually unlimited financial resources of its foreign opponents. Weakened by international (UN Security Council) and unilateral (US and EU) sanctions, Syria and Iran are facing the world’s leading petroleum exporters: Saudi Arabia and Qatar, other Persian Gulf monarchies supported by the League of Arab States, and their Western allies — the United States and the European Union countries.

EU leaders are demanding that Assad leave power immediately, threatening him with new and increasingly more restrictive sanctions. The EU summit in February called the Assad regime illegitimate. And whereas until recently the Western countries limited themselves to sanctions, to strengthening Turkey’s air defenses by deploying upgraded Patriot missile systems near the Syrian border and to providing financial aid for the Syrian opposition, British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President François Hollande recently announced that they would work to convince the authorities in the other EU countries to lift the embargo on weapons for the Syrian rebels. According to a BBC reporter, the two leaders are confident that arms supplies for the Syrian rebels are the most effective way of putting pressure on the Assad government.

Nor are NATO and the United States lagging behind their partners. According to the German weekly magazine Der Spiegel, American experts are training Syrian rebels in Jordan. Reportedly, about 200 rebels have already completed special military training. The magazine did not say whether the American experts came from government agencies or private security firms. According to the publication, over the next six weeks, another 1200 fighters from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) may undergo training at two camps in eastern and southern Jordan. Der Spiegel said that the Jordanian security services are cooperating with three rebel leaders operating in the vicinity of the city of Deraa in southwestern Syria.

It was previously reported that FSA fighters were being trained near the Syrian border in Turkey and included volunteers and mercenaries from other Arab countries, as well as members of al-Qaeda. Units of the armed opposition have crossed into Syria from Turkey and clashed with Syrian government forces and Syrian Kurd volunteer defense squads.

Israel is also taking a tougher stance towards Syria. Tel Aviv initially tried to avoid interfering in Syria’s internal
affairs. An exception was the Israeli Air Force bombing of a column of trucks supposedly transporting weapons from Syria to Lebanon for Hezbollah (according to Israel). Israeli leaders stressed that during Assad’s reign the situation has generally been stable on the Israeli-Syrian border, where there were no serious border incidents for a long time.

Now, according to Israeli military intelligence chief Aviv Kochavi, detachments of the Syrian armed opposition control two thirds of Syria’s population centers, including most of its cities. There is fighting even in Damascus and Aleppo. The country is actually divided into individual zones under the influence of one warring party or another. Areas of the Golan Heights bordering on Israel have become a mosaic of warring enclaves. Kochavi said “11 of the 17 passages (between the demilitarized zone adjacent to Israel and the rest of Syria) are under rebel control, and both refugees and weapons, and even jihadi elements, are moving through them.” According to Israel’s leaders, there is a real threat that radical Islamist groups will come to power in Syria, and that may be accompanied by anti-Israeli actions and terrorist attacks from that quarter. Israel is also concerned that forces loyal to Assad will employ chemical weapons against opposition fighters and that Assad will receive new reinforcements from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

The situation on the Syrian-Israeli border has grown worse. The first incident involving the use of arms took place on March 2, 2013, when Iraqi border guards were forced to open fire in order to prevent fighting between Syrian rebels and Assad’s troops from spreading to Iraqi territory. There was another large-scale incident a few days later that resulted in the deaths of dozens of Syrian and several Iraqi soldiers. Anbar Province, which borders on Syria, was the scene of an attack by Syrian opposition fighters on Syrian soldiers that Iraqi soldiers were escorting home. The casualties included 48 Syrians killed and four wounded, as well as nine Iraqi fatalities. According to Iraq’s Ministry of Defense, the Syrians killed were soldiers in the Syrian Army. They had fled to Iraq some time prior to that in hopes of receiving temporary refuge and medical care. They were first taken to Baghdad, where they received the care they needed, and then a decision was made to deport the Syrians back to their homeland. They came under attack when the Iraqi soldiers escorted them to a border crossing. Iraq classified the incident as an act of aggression and a violation of its sovereignty. In addition, officials called it a “clear violation of human rights” because the Syrians had been wounded and were unarmed.

It is worth noting that the Iraqi government had until recently tried to remain neutral toward events in neighboring Syria. Baghdad was maintaining normal good relations with the official Syrian government while at the same time preventing fighters and military shipments from traversing its territory from Iran and other countries. The Iraqi government was only providing humanitarian aid to wounded persons and refugees from Syria. More than 100,000 refugees have already crossed into the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. According to regional authorities in Dohuk Province, they have recently been receiving an average of 800 to 900 refugees from Syria each day, most of them Kurds.

Thus, the protracted internal armed conflict in Syria is affecting an increasing number of states, and it has a tendency to expand into neighboring countries. The international community, major world powers and regional and international organizations (UN, the Arab League and others) have proved helpless to stop the carnage. According to the UN, the number of Syrian refugees may double to more than 2 million people by the end of 2013. The country is on the brink of a humanitarian disaster.

Stanislav Ivanov, Cand. Sc. (History), is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This article was written expressly for New Eastern Outlook.