Anatomy of ISIS and Possible Scenarios of its Evolution

Recently, the international media has been paying considerable attention to the coverage of the Islamic State’s (ISIS) actions, replicating videos depicting parades of the jihadists with heavy weapons and military equipment, the atrocities against prisoners and hostages and the destruction of museum treasures of world significance. Despite the air strikes by air forces of US and its allies, the Islamic Caliphate continues to build its state structure on the territory of Iraq and Syria, establishing sharia law and engaging in offensive fighting on several fronts. Many Islamic militants outside Iraq and Syria (in Libya, Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, in the North Caucasus, Central Asia, etc.) are giving their so-called "oath of allegiance" to the latter-day caliph.

The world community is wondering: where did this new terrorist monster come from, whose crimes eclipsed those of al-Qaeda and Taliban? What lies behind its medieval brutality and obscurantism, what are the roots, the causes, the origins of this phenomenon, what else can we expect from the Islamic State? After all, centuries have passed since religious wars in Europe came to an end and people stopped dying because of theological differences.

It seems that the world has not fully realized the extent of the threat of radical Islam to our civilization. Not enough attention is being paid to the study of the ideological basis and reasons for the appeal of ISIS to millions of our planet’s inhabitants. If the desire of Arabs and Muslims to go on jihad (holy war against infidels) can at least be explained, the influx of young men and women from perfectly good European families into the ranks of jihadists, however, remains a mystery. It is unlikely that the latter can be universally regarded as mentally unstable or mere adventurers. ISIS’s attraction for them can be partly attributed to the void of ideas and moral guidelines of Western civilization, the overall moral degradation of societies, when instead of traditional family values, what is being promoted is individualism, violence, greed for gain at any cost, same-sex marriages, sexual promiscuity and disrespect for culture, religion and age-old traditions. Added to this is the growing dissatisfaction of young people with their position within the family and society, the lack of prospects to realize their potential and the active influence of Islamists on their audience via the Internet. This expands the geography and demographics of the jihadist movement, allowing young people, regardless of nationality, gender and material status to communicate with recruiters online, as a result of which they go to Syria and Iraq voluntarily. The FBI admitted that the emissaries of the Islamic State operate in all 50 states in the US, and roughly the same picture exists in Europe and the CIS. We can assume that ISIS does not ignore the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Today, the Islamic Caliphate is supported by most of the Arab-Sunni population of Iraq and Syria, which by the most conservative estimate is over 12 million people. The central governments in Baghdad and Damascus have long ignored the needs and aspirations of the Sunnis and, in fact, have pushed them into an Islamic Caliphate. Financial support of ISIS by non-governmental organizations and various Islamic funds of the Persian Gulf monarchies and other Arab and Muslim countries, including Turkey, is ongoing.

If you do not delve into the theological jungle but look only at the slogans and actions of the ISIS leaders, the following can be noted.

After the spread of Islam across the globe as the youngest and most popular religion, we are also seeing its ugly side - the dissemination of ideas or radical political Islam. In any case, the religious and intellectual appeal of the Islamic
State with all its external, unjustified aggressiveness and dogmatism of views cannot be underestimated. Supporters of radical Islam are trying to take the Arab (Muslim) society back into the 7th century, when Islam had helped unite the Arab tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and allowed them to subsequently establish their empire over a vast area called the Arab or Islamic Caliphate. Today, we are witnessing in Iraq, Syria, Libya and other Arab countries a virtual recurrence of early Islam, when war and killing infidels, destruction of cultural and historical monuments are again becoming a norm of behavior.

The jihadists believe that any denial of the sanctity of the Qur’an and Muhammad’s prophecies is blatant apostasy and enumerate many other acts, because of which a Muslim can be excommunicated from Islam (the use or sale of alcohol, drugs, wearing western clothes, shaving their beards, participation in the election of secular authorities, reluctance to call other people apostates, etc.). The list also includes membership in Shi’ism, because the Islamic State considers Shi’ism an innovation, and according to the Qur’an this is a negation of the original perfection. In accordance with the custom of takfir (accusation of infidelity), the Islamic State intends to cleanse the world of infidels. Their leaders include in the ranks of infidels not only atheists, pagans, members of other religions and the Shiites, but also Sunni Muslims, who do not share their radical views. In accordance with the ninth chapter of the Qur’an (Surah “Al-Tauba” or “Repentance”), the ISIS leaders allow to remain on the territory of the Caliphate and only spare the lives of Yezidis, Christians and people of other faiths, if they pay a special tax, known as the jizya, as well as recognize their subordinate position which is close to slavery.

What are the possible scenarios for the future evolution of the de facto Islamic Caliphate existing today?

1. The international community will still be able to combine their efforts in the fight against ISIS, discredit its ideology, deny it support from the local population, isolate it from the outside, crush its most capable units and disarm the remaining. According to Western experts, this can only be achieved through a new large-scale ground operation lasting several years by a coalition of countries.

2. The Caliphate will abandon its aggressive intentions, stop mass killings and violence, transform into a moderate Arab-Sunni state and can improve relations with Damascus and Baghdad, Riyadh, Doha and Ankara and other LAS (League of Arab States) countries. In this case, it can be preserved and even considered in the West as an outpost against the strengthening of Iran in the region.

3. Inconsistency and indecision in actions against ISIS by concerned states and the reluctance of the Caliphate leaders to abandon their radical views and criminal acts can lead to ‘Somaliazation’ of the region, with an atmosphere of chaos and violence reigning over the territory of Iraq, Syria and other Arab countries for many years. Iraq and Syria may finally lose their statehood and split into enclaves along ethnic and religious lines.

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