Activities of ISIS in Libya

The Islamic State (ISIS), a radical Islamist group, became organised in Libya in the spring of 2014. Libyan militants, previously fighting with ISIS in Syria and Iraq, returned to their homeland to form a branch of the organisation there. The organisation was founded in April 2014 with 300 of these “returnees” in Derna with the creation of the Shura Council of Islamic Youth (MSSI), swearing allegiance to the leader of ISIS Abu Baqr al-Baghdadi. (Groups that have sworn allegiance to (bay’ah) Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, in different countries often automatically call themselves the Islamic State without mentioning the original name). In a short period of time, the number of the organisation has grown to 1000 people. Confrontations between the newly formed group and local existing jihadists organisations have cropped up. During the violent encounters in the summer of 2014, MSSI managed to force the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade and Ansar al-Sharia out of the city, who are ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda. As a result, ISIS supporters finally managed to gain a foothold in Derna.

From October 2014 to April 2015 ISIS in addition to Derna formed a network of cells under its control in the cities of Libya: in Beida, Benghazi, Sirte and Tripoli. By November 2014 supporters of Baghdadi announced the East of Libya a "province of the caliphate". The group has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks on police stations in Tripoli, a refinery in al-Ghani, kidnappings and the executions of foreigners. Amongst the most resonant actions of ISIS are the massacre of Coptic Egyptian workers in February 2015 and Ethiopian Christians in April 2015 and the attacks on diplomatic missions of foreign states. An attack on the Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli on January 27, 2015 sparked clashes between ISIS militants and moderate Islamists of Misrata, members of the Fajr coalition. The group also organised explosions at the Labraq airbase in Bayda and suicide attacks against the troops of General K. Haftar, the head of the Dignity operation.

There are currently three jihadists groups that have sworn allegiance (bay’ah) to A. Baghdadi’s ISIS army: the Islamic State in Barqa, the Islamic State in Fezzan and the Islamic State in Tripoli. Currently the total number of members in Libya has reached 3 000 people. Groups associated with ISIS control a significant part of Nafaliya in the central part of the country. In Sirte, they have taken a number of neighbourhoods, several television and radio stations, undertaking the broadcasting of propagandist programs.

One of ISIS' current leaders in Libya is Abdelhakim Belhadj, the "Arab Afghan", one of the leaders of the "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)" This contemporary jihadist figure has a long-standing relationship with US intelligence agencies. Belhadj coordinates the activities of the Islamic State training centres in the eastern part of Libya around the city of Derna.

A previous active collaborator with al-Qaeda, Belhadj repeatedly boasted about the killing of US troops in Afghanistan in video records. However he later became a "model insurgent" seeking to topple Gaddafi. Led by the division of the "Libyan Islamic Fighting Group" (formed in 1995 with the goal of overthrowing Gaddafi), attacked the Bab al-Azizia district in central Tripoli, where a military base, a complex of government offices and the residence and bunker of Muammar Gaddafi were located.

The USA and its NATO allies called Belhadj a “freedom fighter” in 2011 who courageously led his supporters in the victory against the "despotic Gaddafi". Reputable western publications note that "Belhadj served the cause of the
United States so well in Libya that he even received an award from Senator John McCain”, who called Belhadj and his followers heroes.

The episode with Belhadj in Libya demonstrates its "sort of evolution as a result of changes in campaigns of foreign players in the solution of its geostrategic objectives. The "LIFG militant", a "moderate", "their man in Tripoli" is now one of the ISIS leaders in Libya.

The United States have been and continue to be promoters of extremist militants from Libya, Syria and beyond, and all the talk about "moderate rebels" is just rhetoric, designed to "deceive the public." Washington is providing assistance to those forces that meet their interests, regardless of their ideological affiliation.

Controlled ISIS military training camps in the vicinity of Derna continue to act as the main supplier of the supporters of "pure Islam" in the region. It can be argued with high probability that these training structures are controlled by intelligence services of the foreign states.

Western policy in support of "moderate insurgents" is nothing but a PR campaign. The myth of "moderate insurgents", the example with Belhadj shouldn't be reviewed in a vacuum. For more than three years Washington has actively supported the so-called moderate insurgents in Syria. The program in which terrorist groups such as the Al-Farq Brigade and the Khazm Brigade, Liwa al-Qusair and Liwa al-Turkoman participated in at different times, later along with many other Islamists organisations and also some factions of the Free Syrian Army entered in the Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS respectively, adding to the arsenal of modern weapons supplied to them earlier by Washington to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Dmitry Nechitaylo, candidate of political sciences, senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook"