

Battle for Levant

The war in Syria tormenting the country is to be lasting for long. And today it is obvious that each party of the conflict builds their own strategic plans bidding for this country.

Currently Syria is roughly divided into four parts each o run by a conflicting party that exerts control over a substantial part of the country. The main protagonists of the conflict include apart from Assad's regime and its allies, ISIL, JAN (An-Nusra Front) and FSA with its allies.

Territorial expansion and strengthening of "Islamic state" (IG) positions in Iraq and Syria has launched counter operations by the military forces of the international coalition against IG. These developments significantly change the balance of power in the Middle East and consequently challenge Iran's policy aimed at preserving and strengthening its influence in the Middle East.

Iran could neglect these developments and has to pay specific attention to several important aspects of IG politics and ideology that are actively strengthening IG position in the region. Tehran also could not miss the fact that the IG expansion is not limited only by Iraq and Syria but is far more ambitious because IG is aiming to extend its influence, in Lebanon (Tripoli), in Palestine (Gaza), as well as in a number of other countries of the Arab Maghreb.

Tehran also feels serious concerns about ideological and political plans of IG and in particular it is alerted by the declared idea of a new trans-border political configuration under the guise of restoring the "Caliphate". This ides has found some overt support not only among a considerable number of the Arab population, but among the part of the ruling elites as well. One such case is manifest in the attitudes of the ruling Turkish elites.

It is important to note that IG ideological assault is fanned through modern means of communication and is skillfully publicized being targeted across the established party politics. Thus, for instance, a considerable part of the ruling Islamic party and what is more important, its opposition in the nationalistic circles have found much in common in their calculations of the potential conversion of the ideological "chimera" into very specific political actions based on the increasingly popular idea of the "New Ottomans".

Naturally, a situation like this represents even in the short run a contiguous threat to the ambitious political plans of Tehran for the region of the Middle East.

In fact, when it comes to the impact of this new aggressive ideology, IG poses a real threat to the existing governments and to the state systems of many Arab countries that have been well established over the past several decades in the whole

region of the Middle East, because it is breaking their national structure, the national sovereignty and moreover it erodes the national identity within the Middle Eastern political culture. This culture has set firm roots in the 20th century international politics when it emerged in the aftermath of the Anglo-French partition of the Ottoman legacy.

In case at least a part of these IG plans will be implemented on the occupied territories, the domino impact will be spreading far beyond the zone of direct military control. That is posing real ominous threat to the preservation of the internal stability and national sovereignty of the Iranian state, which includes significant parts of multiple and diverse ethnic and religious communities.

A spillover spread of IS in Levant and its rapidly growing political ambitions in the region have attracted substantial numbers of its supporters from different distant and nearby countries, including the neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan (one such example is represented by the so called Horasan group that had puzzled many experts) and also from Iran. This forces Tehran and its confident supporter Hezbollah to start acting decisively and resolutely. They are aiming to establish a solid military and viable political infrastructure in Levant that would be able to prevent, contain and neutralize any challenge to the Iranian and “Hezbollah” positions whatever the future situation might bring into the fore.

It is interesting to note that Hezbollah is building its strategy toward Syria on a five year basis planning its policy similarly to what had been previously done in the Soviet Union that had its 5 year planning horizon. In accordance with this strategic plan Hezbollah creates its own arsenals and establishes new defense factions in Syria. It is evident that Hezbollah doesn't want a prolonged Syrian war to affect in any significant way its established positions in Lebanon, though it has no desire to pay a human and logistic price for its sustained presence in Syria.

To meet these goals Hezbollah's leadership has recently adopted an action plan according to which special political framework should be set up for Syria. This arrangement will place the country under a separate political authority affiliated to the Shura Council, and primarily to its Secretary General Mr. Hassan Nasrallah.

More over Hezbollah strategic planning has stepped far beyond its presence within the Lebanese borders and it is trying to consolidate its strategic presence not only in Syria but in Iraq and Yemen as well. Special representatives and separate units of Hezbollah intended to run their special operations in the above mentioned countries though directly related to (Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi and Yemeni local support) would in this way or other be connected to control from Lebanon.

Yet at present it is Syria that remains the principal battle field requiring constant combat action. Hence, Hezbollah has decided to establish under its command a military force of over 50 thousands fighters which would be recruited in different localities from various strata of Syrian population. For most part this involves Syrians that have recently been under massive and aggressive Iranian propaganda and have in the result converted to Shia's Islam. In addition to that new recruits come from different sects of Christians, Druze and even Sunnis modeling the

Resistance factions that had been operating in Lebanon. At the same time one can observe the high ranking Hezbollah operatives who are in constant touch with the command units and control sources in Syria and in Iraq providing them with direct guidance from Lebanon.

Regarding these extensive jihadist plans of Hezbollah in the Middle East region one may wonder if the front of fighting with Israel is still open and what is the difference between strategies of Hezbollah and ISIL? These questions arise in view of the ideological doctrines proclaimed in their respective political plans?

It's quite obvious that these ambitions Hezbollah plans might have seen light and can be effectively implemented only with the guidance and help from Iran. Iran places Levant high on the list of its national security priorities. Levant represents a key element in Iranian global fight with Sunnis for the dominance in the Middle Eastern region.

According to some reliable sources within Syrian opposition in the country and from the sources outside Syria, there are ample evidences that Iran has recently launched a special program to establish in Syria as a parallel to the Syrian national army special new fighting forces set under the name of "National security units" (NSU).

After years of endless combat fighting it is becoming quite clear that the national Syrian forces had been severely damaged (if not to say that their potential of a full-fledged well equipped combat army has evaporated). Losses of Syrian army personnel surpass any reasonable limits. Moreover, ruling regime calculations on improving this dire situation by launching a new military recruiting campaign in order to set reserve troops have been unsuccessful even in such stronghold areas as Tartous and Latakia.

Reportedly these new combat forces (NSU) are to be overseen and controlled directly by the officers from Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG) and by Hezbollah officers as well. Those units have to be deployed all over Syria in its different areas. This development on the one hand not only indicates seriousness of the situation, but also serves as an indicator that Iran currently acts in Syria with what can be called an "open face" and does not need any more to hide in the shadow light what it has been tacitly doing for the past two years. On the other hand, this clearly demonstrates Iranian keenness in involvement in Syrian affairs and it shows that Iran intends to put under its full control all the security issues and strategic administrative functions in Syria.

This new Iranian "perestroika" and "openness" (praying Rahbar will soon follow Gorbachev's type policy in many other fields) in Syria marks in fact a very peculiar situation for the Syrian army and government. On the grounds where NSU units with the help of some Baath combat factions (for décor, of course, or where Iranian official ideology of "velaity fakih" and the secular Arab nationalism of Baathism) are located, they will replace the national defense forces and will represent the main military and political force. Assad's Syria thus may forget about its national sovereignty. According to the same sources NSU has already made provisions to pay their officers high salaries in the range between 30 to 50 thousand Syrian pounds per month and will provide them with other incentives.

Establishing its new army in Syria Tehran counts on the recruitment (first of all in Iran) for mandatory conscript (reserve) military service. That will supposedly cut down the monthly salaries of their existing national defense force (a very dangerous and controversial measure in our view). Another source is recruiting mercenaries from all over the world promising them new adventures and an opportunity to gain some good money. Iran wouldn't be Iran (at least in their strategic thinking) if it didn't probe for trying at first to test its plans in practice. Some knowledgeable sources claim that during September - October Iran has already established one such test unit in the Golan region under the name of "Suweida Shield faction" (SSF). This test was not too successful much due to the lack of requisite support from the local population. No doubt that this lesson has been learned and next time Iran will be acting in a well calculated way.

At this stage of the military-political conflict Iranian leadership considers IG as a potential threat or better the rival for Tehran's plans of strengthening its ideological and political influence in the Middle Eastern region. Therefore, in recent months, IRI with the help of its allies from Lebanese "Hezbollah" has taken a number of active military and political steps that are supposed to ensure preservation of Iran's positions in Levant in case of any possible scenario.

Over the past year, IG managed to successfully penetrate the very fabric of Arab revolutionary movements, which were supported by Iran and has strengthened its positions in the region. At the same time, for instance in Syria, IG is fighting not so much against Assad's regime but rather against the West and its supports from Syrian armed opposition forces.

On the one hand, IG is committed to the overthrow of existing Arab regimes in other countries, because in their takfiri conceptions they consider the policies of leadership in these countries as unjust, inappropriate and not corresponding to the standards of "true" Islam. From this perspective, IG may pose a major potential threat to the stability in Saudi Arabia and other Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

On the other hand, the above mentioned threat posed by IG to the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, and its strong anti-Western sentiments have positively impressed Tehran. Iran intends to use this situation as leverage in the dialogue with the West on the nuclear issue, and hopes to force the United States to recognize Tehran as an integral part of the newly created system of regional security in the Middle East. In other words IG comes as the best thing that Tehran's mullahs might look for in seeking a deal with the US president Obama.

In this context, one cannot exclude that due to the changing political conjuncture in the region, IG may start to be considered by Tehran not as a "rival" but rather as at least a temporary "companion" useful for the implementation of their strategic plans in the Middle East.

One should not forget that Iran that has serious military and political positions in Iraq has recently relatively easily "surrendered" its faithful ally N. al-Maliki and didn't seriously oppose IG at the initial stages of their military operations in Iraq, which subsequently has led to the seizure of a number of strategically important facilities and of such major urban centers as Mosul.