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The Significance of the Battle for Aleppo

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In Aleppo the fierce fighting continues. After the peace agreement was broken by the armed opposition, Syrian government forces launched an offensive in order to completely blockade and take control of the western part of the city that had been seized by militants.

Anti-government forces regularly shell civilians in Aleppo's Christian neighborhoods and in the Sheikh Maqsood district that is inhabited by Kurds. One result of this new phase in the military campaign has been an increase in the influence of jihadist groups, especially Jabhat al-Nusra. It is this group and its allies that Turkey and the US are trying to proclaim the «moderate opposition», which is supposedly capable of battling the Islamic State. But when it comes to their methods for disposing of political opponents and Christians, these radical Islamic groups are indistinguishable.

The leader of al-Qaeda urges the «moderate» and «radical» militants to unite

Note should be made of yet another jihadist group that emerged in Syria in March-April of last year. They are known as Jaish al-Fatah. That group incorporates Ahrar ash-Sham and Jund al-Aqsa, in addition to Jabhat al-Nusra. Most experts consider Ahrar ash-Sham to be the same type of Salafi-jihadist group as Jabhat al-Nusra, which is included in the UN Security Council's list of terrorist organizations.

In 2015 the former leader of Ahrar ash-Sham, Hassan Abboud, thus described his differences with the Islamic State: *«Democracy is a sword the West holds over other nations. It is a way for just a few people to control a nation. In accordance with Sharia, there are several ways of choosing a ruler. In a monarchy, the successor inherits his title. In other societies that observe Sharia the ruler is selected by the wisest and most respectable men after consulting with the people. All these methods are legitimate. We recognize that ideally there should be a caliph and his slaves. Our differences with the Islamic State concern matters of style, not substance. The proclamation of the caliphate was premature and was not followed by the fulfillment of all the legal procedures».*

The former leader of Ahrar ash-Sham sees countering the «Shiite threat» as the most important task today. He claims that *«the Shiite sickle is being held over the Islamic ummah. This Persian Safavid sickle is the biggest obstacle to restoring its glory»*. The term «sickle» of course is understood to mean the «Shiite crescent» – Iran's coalition with Syria and Hezbollah. The interesting adjective «Safavid» refers to Iran. Shiite Islam became the official religion of Iran under the Safavid dynasty (1506-1721), and Salafis often use this term when speaking of contemporary Iran.

In the meantime, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization, part of which calls itself Jabhat al-Nusra, has appealed to all opponents of the legitimate Syrian government with a request to shore up their unity in the face of the Syrian government army's offensive near Aleppo. *«Either unite or face death»*, the terrorist leader has stated Ayman al-Zawahiri has praised the role of Jabhat al-Nusra and fiercely criticized the Syrian ceasefire. The leader of al-Qaeda has demanded that «true Muslims» of all countries focus their efforts on waging jihad in Syria. He claims that *«if the Mujahedeen do not unite, defeat awaits them at the hands of Western and Russian crusaders»*.

Hamza bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's 23-year-old son, has allied himself with the leader of al-Qaeda in support of Jabhat al-Nusra. He claims that «the Islamic ummah must concentrate on waging jihad in Syria and tighten its ranks, leaving behind any momentary disagreements».

Turkey's pretend war against the Islamic State

After these events, Ankara suddenly grew wary of the expanding Islamic State in northern Syria. Erdogan not only announced his intention to clear IS militants out of the Syrian side of the border, he also refused to rule out Turkish ground forces taking part in local operations against that terrorist group. On April 6, a company consisting of armed factions of Syrian Turkmen who are bankrolled by Turkish intelligence services, in addition to several units of Salafis, captured the town of al-Rai from Islamic State rebels and threatened to advance toward Azaz, but on April 11 they were pushed back by jihadists. This was understandable: Daesh militants take their fighting seriously – when they go into combat they aren't bluffing.

According to information provided by the Turkish journalist Burak Bekdil, after Ankara formally joined the anti-terror coalition, the flood of weapons and explosives passing through Turkey to regions controlled by IS not only did not decrease, it even increased. Last year 2,500 tons of ammonium nitrate, 456 tons of potash nitrate, and 75 tons of aluminum powder passed from Turkey into regions under terrorist control. All of these ingredients are used to manufacture improvised explosive devices.

Despite a string of terrorist acts committed by IS supporters inside Turkey, on March 24 a Turkish court freed seven members of IS, including a field commander. Such leniency leads to irreversible transformations in Turkish society. According to opinion polls, nearly 10% of Turkish citizens (nearly eight million people!) see the Islamic State in a positive light and do not consider it a terrorist organization. This all but guarantees an influx of new fighters from Turkey into the ranks of Daesh.

What has prompted these changes in Ankara's behavior – a country that until recently was considered the unofficial patron of the Islamic State? First of all, the Kurdish People's Protection Units in Syria, which have close ties to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, have recently proven successful in their fight against IS. They have taken control of the northeastern section of the Syrian-Turkish border and could move west. Erdogan's government is eager to prevent Kurdish units from advancing toward the strategically important cities of Azaz and Jarabulus. They are trying to seize these locations themselves, hiding behind the rallying cry of «The Battle Against the Islamic State». Second, after the blows inflicted by Russia's Aerospace Defense Forces, the Erdogan family's oil business deals with Daesh are no longer as profitable as they once were. All this is forcing Ankara to roll back its cooperation with IS and switch to working with Jabhat al-Nusra and its related groups.

Ankara's change of tactics in regard to Syria has Washington's full support. The Americans' recent shipment of High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems to Turkey is setting off alarm bells. These systems are capable of firing missiles 90 kilometers deep into Syrian territory.

In his May 10 interview with CNN correspondent Christiane Amanpour, US Secretary of State John Kerry warned Russia of big problems ahead if it continued to support the Syrian government army's offensive in Aleppo. He noted that «*Russia has an interest in not being bogged down forever in Syria... [and] becoming the target of the entire Sunni world and having every jihadi in the region coming after Russia*».

The US is willing to do anything it takes to prevent Bashar al-Assad's government from gaining strength. If the government troops achieve military success in the Aleppo region, about 90% of Syrian territory would then be under the control of the legitimate government. And that is not part of the West's plan. Therefore, John Kerry is threatening to set an August 2016 deadline for Russia to help form a «transitional government» in Syria, claiming that otherwise shipments of American weapons will begin flowing to the «moderate opposition». We know very well what an American-style «transition period» looks like – we saw it in Iraq and Libya. That period began in Iraq after the American occupation in 2003 and it continues to this day, accompanied by constant explosions in Baghdad, chronic corruption, and a civil war in the country's northern provinces. In Libya the «transition period» ended with the collapse of the state. And this is the future the US has in mind for Syria. The old plans haven't changed.