Original article

Circumstances of the rise of the so-called Islamic State according to Patrick Cockburn's perspective

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INFORMATIONS	ABSTRACT
	The aim of this article is to analyze the rise of the so-called Islamic State in the perspective of a Middle Eastern and commentator for "The Independent", Patrick Cockburn, who also publishes in the "London Review of Books. The text begins with a sketch of the geopolitical determinants for the spread of the Islamic holy war, i.e. jihad. Then, it focuses on the disturbing phenomenon of sectarianism – directed mainly at the Shia branch of Islam – the attitudes of extremist Sunni preachers. The third chapter presents the complex combination of events that has contributed to the growth of extremist tendencies in Iraq. The subject of further deliberations is the conversion of the initially secular resistance to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria into a civil war, in which jihadists are the main opponents of the president.

1. Introduction

In the world of the English-speaking press, the London daily "The Independent" is particularly privileged in terms of reports from the Middle East. It publishes the correspondences of Robert Fisk living in Beirut [Czapnik 2014], as well as Patrick Cockburn, the Irish journalist present in the region since 1979, who also publishes in perhaps the best journal in the world, "London Review of Books" [Czapnik 2014a]. The fact that in 2013 he was awarded the Editorial Intelligence Comment Award in the category of Foreign Commentator of the Year is testimony to the quality of Cockburn's work [The Independent… 2016]. The history of the so-called Islamic State[1], in its entirety, confirms the high quality of his craftsmanship, the ability for in-depth, multi-faceted anal-

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[1] Adding the words "so-called" to the Islamic State is intended to emphasize that we are not dealing with a state structure – either de facto or de jure – but a formation that claims to be one. Different authors regard this issue in different ways, for example, "Le Monde diplomatique" – the Polish edition – Consequently writes about the "Organization of the Islamic State".

ysis, and the broad outline of the conditions of the origin and duration of the jihadist caliphate. The analysis of the content of Cockburn's texts helps to understand the occurrence of the social phenomenon, which is the self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate, the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham, ISIS.

According to Cockburn, there is no alternative to first-hand reportage. Journalists rarely admit to themselves and others that they rely on secondary sources or acquired from people involved on one of the sides. What is more, people who happen to be in situations attractive to the media often convince themselves that they know more than they really do. Survivors of the suicide attacks in Baghdad for a minute were describing the details of the terrorist's facial expression just before the explosion, forgetting that if they had been so closed to him, they would have been killed. The best witnesses were small boys selling cigarettes, as they were still looking out for customers. The realities of war are often easier to express than the reality of peacetime. Serious events are difficult to hide because they affect thousands of people – soldiers, partisans and civilians, and after the fighting begins, authorities are less able to limit the movement of journalists. The secrets regarding an occupant of a given territory, who is winning, and who is losing, are more difficult to keep. It is easy to find informants. In times of danger, in Belfast, Basra or Damascus, people are aware of every potential threat in their neighborhood: whether seeing a new face or recognizing appearance of a military unit. The government or the armed forces may try to keep secrets by banning reports, but they pay the price for it – the news vacuum is filled with information provided by their enemies. The Syrian government exposed itself to the loss of image by denying visas to most foreign journalists, the policy that has only been revised after a period of time [Cockburn 2013].

The aim of this article is to describe the growing importance of Islamic jihadists in the Middle East from the perspective of texts of Irish journalist Patrick Cockburn. His analyses appear in the London daily "The Independent" and the bi-weekly "London Review of Books". The text begins with a sketch of the geopolitical circumstances of the jihadists' success in Iraq and Syria. The author then outlines the influence of Sunni preachers who spread hatred directed at other Muslims – Shi'ites. The last two parts of the article discuss the triumph of sectarianism and the appropriation of the Syrian revolution by Sunni extremists.

2. Geopolitical conditions of the middle Eastern Jihad

It is impossible to understand the rise of the so-called Islamic State without paying attention to the Arab Spring that started in the second decade of the 21st century. In Syria, the uprising begun in March 2011, demonstrators protested against the brutality of the Bashar al-Assad's regime, shouting: "Peace! Peace", after which the country slipped into the abyss of civil war. However, as one of the commentators said, if free elections had been conducted three years later, Assad would have won them undoubtedly.

The question arises as to why the Arab world has proved so incapable of implementing positive changes and why the new authorities are committing so many errors and

crimes of old regimes. The contrast between the humanitarian principles of the beginnings of the revolution and the bloodbath of their ends has many precedents, starting with the French Revolution. However, in the last two decades in the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus, the rapid degradation of what began as a mass uprising is particularly striking. Cockburn lived in Moscow at the beginning of the Second Chechen War, and also visited the Chechen president Aslan Mashkadov in Grozny, who was calling unsuccessfully to declare a ceasefire. The security guards of the president feared that Chechen kidnappers would abduct him, demanding a ransom. The first Chechen uprising in the years 1994-1999 was as a heroic people's struggle for independence. Three years later, it was replaced by a sectarian movement and dominated by warlords. The war became too dangerous for journalists to report about it, which made it disappear from the media map. As one of the journalists put it in a conversation with Cockburn – during the First Chechen War he would have been fired by his agency if he had left Grozny, but then the risk of kidnapping was so great that he would have been fired if he had gone there.

The extent to which the uprisings of 2011 turned out to be incapable of establishing better forms of government surprised opposition movements, their Western supports and initially extremely friendly Western media. The revolutions were misunderstood, as they were the result of unpredictable cooperation of various forces struggling with a common enemy. The political, social and economic roots of the 2011 uprising are very deep. This was not obvious to all, partly because Western commentators overestimated the importance of new ICT technologies. The protesters were proficient in the art of propaganda, showing the West the image of uprisings as velvet revolutions, whose vanguard were English-speaking, well-educated blog and Twitter users. They wanted to convince Western societies that the protesters were similar to them, and that what happened in the Middle East in 2011 was close to the anti-communist and pro-Western revolutions in Eastern Europe after 1989 (all information in this subchapter – unless otherwise indicated [Cockburn 2014b]).

The opposition demanded personal freedom, rarely addressing the issues of social and economic inequality, even if they were the cause of popular irritation against the *status quo*. Many restaurants appeared in the center of Damascus, but wages of the majority of Syrians were not growing, unlike prices – farmers were ruined by four years of drought, forced to relocate to districts of misery in the suburbs of cities. According to the UN, two, or even three, million Syrians live in extreme poverty. Handicraft companies were collapsing, destroyed by cheap imports from Turkey and China. Economic liberalization, praised by foreign capital, filled the pockets of a handful of few well-connected people. Even members of the Mukhabarat, the secret police, had to survive a month for 200 dollars a month. The Assad clan alienated itself socially, similarly to semi-monarchic families of their counterparts in Egypt, Libya and Iraq. The authorities, trusting the forces of the state, including the police, ignored the problems of the rest of the population, especially part-time workers, great numbers of the well-educated youth, out of whom only a few are able to improve their living conditions.

The rationale for taking power by the Arab leaders of the late sixties was the promise to create strong, nationally independent states. To some extent they have succeeded: Muammar Gaddafi played a key role in raising oil prices in 1973, and Hafez al-Assad created a state that alone managed fight with Israel for dominance over Lebanon. However, the opponents of their regimes recognized that the national character was a mere propaganda of ruthless dictatorships, helping them justify their control. Deprived of nationalism – even if national unity was a historical fiction – the states do not have an ideology allowing them to compete against religious or ethnic loyalty.

It is easy to criticize the rebels and reformers of the Arab world for failing to meet challenges that they face after overthrowing the old regimes. Their actions seem ineffective when compared with the Cuban Revolution or the struggle for the liberation of Vietnam. However, one should realize that in the last two decades they had to operate in a very unfriendly environment. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant support – or at least tolerance – of the United States (and only this country), which was crucial for the takeover of power. Naser could turn to the USSR to confirm the independence of Egypt during the Suez Crisis in 1956, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, smaller states could no longer find their places between Washington and Moscow. Saddam said in 1990 that one of the reasons for the invasion of Kuwait was the fact that in the future such an operation would be impossible, as he would need to face the American power. These calculations proved to be completely wrong, but his forecast was realistic – at least until the United States was unable to achieve its goals neither in Iraq nor in Afghanistan.

In spite of everything, practically without the world noticing it, at least one national revolution has been successful. In 1990, millions of Kurds, left without a state after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, lived as persecuted minorities in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The uprising in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War ended in defeat, at least 180,000 people were killed by chemical weapons and as a result of executions at the end of the conflict. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), combining Marxism-Leninism with Kurdish nationalism, which began its activity in 1974 was crushed by the Turkish army in the late nineties – the Kurds were relocated and three thousand Kurdish villages were destroyed. In the northeastern Syria, in the lands inhabited by the Kurds, Arab settlers were placed, while not granting citizenship to many Kurds. In Iran, the government kept a firm hand on the Kurdish provinces. All this has changed. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is close to becoming an independent oil-rich state, military and diplomatically stronger than many UN members. In November 2013, the president of the KRG, Masoud Barzani, during a speech in the Kurdish capital of Turkey, Diyarbakir, talked about "the brotherhood of Turks and Kurds". Beside him was the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who spoke of "Kurdistan", as though he forgot that a few years earlier one could go to Turkish prison by a sheer memory of it. In Syria, the local branch of the PKK has control over a significant part of the northeastern part of the country, where two and a half million Kurds live. They turned out to be the only force capable of successfully opposing ISIS, as demonstrated by the siege of Kurdish Kobani. In Kobani, jihadists for the first time had to face a determined opponent – the People's Protection Units (Yekineyen Parastina Gel, YPG) and

its political representation – the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD is a Syrian branch of the PKK. The Americans supported the organization, which they officially recognized as terrorist – Barack Obama could not afford another humiliation by ISIS [Cockburn 2014d].

The rebellion in the Kurdish territories has been going on for almost half a century. In Iraq, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, were experts at manipulating foreign intelligence – Iranian, Syrian, American and Turkish – while not becoming their puppets. The Kurds formed a cadre of well-educated and clever political leaders, making alliances with non-Kurdish opposition groups. They were fortunate that their worst defeat preceded the catastrophic for Saddam invasion of Kuwait, which allowed them to take control of the enclave protected by the American Air Force in 1991. The Kurds started engaging in a civil war against the Iraqi state. Another event favorable to them was the American decision on the invasion, which aimed at removing Saddam from power. Kurdish leaders successfully positioned themselves between the US and Iran, without becoming dependent on any of these states. At present, it is unclear whether the attempt to gain independence by thirty million Kurds will be effective, but they have become too strong to easily suppress their aspirations. Their successful should be a lesson to the movements of the Arab Spring. If the Arab opposition movements were as wise as the Kurds, perhaps they would have accomplished much more. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in northern Iraq mobilized military support from the coalition of more than 60 countries against ISIS [International Crisis… 2015]. Another thing is that the Kurds used the situation in Iraq and took control of Kirkuk (the object of their dispute with the Arabs), a region rich in oil and characterized by rich cultural symbolism [Harling 2014].

None of the religious parties that took over governments, whether in Iraq in 2005 or Egypt in 2012, were able to consolidate their power. All rebels seek support from foreign enemies of their states, but the Kurds do it the wisest way – they learned the lesson in 1975 when Iran betrayed them by signing the Algiers Agreement with Saddam, cutting off the arms supply. Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition reflects the policies and divisions of its sponsors. The resistance to the state has taken on a military dimension too quickly to be able to develop an experienced national leadership and political programs. The discreditation of nationalism and communism combined with saying what the Americans want to hear, means that they are at the mercy of fate. They lack the vision of non-authoritarian nation states, capable of competing with the religious fanaticism of Sunni al-Qaeda fighters and similar movements funded by the oil states of the Persian Gulf. The Middle East is entering a long period of ferment, during which the counter-revolution may have as much difficulty with consolidation as it was with the revolution.

Iraq has disappeared from the media map, although even a thousand Iraqis are killed every month, mostly in attacks targeting civilians. When in January 2013 it rained several days in Baghdad, a sewage system – allegedly repaired at the cost of a million dollars – failed, and some streets were literally flooded with dirty water and trash. In Syr-

ia, many opposition militants who fought to defend their community have become bandits and hooligans after coming to power. In the years 2011-2012, foreign leaders and journalists repeatedly predicted a quick defeat of Assad [Cockburn 2013].

The extent to which the armed opposition was supported from the outside is shown by the confessions of Sassam al-Jamal, the head of the Ahfad al-Rasoul's brigade, former commander of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in eastern Syria. He claims that it was obvious that his brigade was sponsored by the Gulf monarchies – initially Qatar, then Saudi Arabia. Jamal argues that representatives from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Qatar, just like individuals from special forces of the United States, the United Kingdom and France participated in the meetings of the FSA military council. During one meeting in Ankara, according to Jamal, the deputy defense minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Salman bil Sultan, the intelligence chief's brother, Bandar bil Sultan, directly asked the armed opposition, which had plans to attack Assad, about its needs in terms of weapons, ammunition and money. It seems that the movement was entirely controlled by Arab and Western intelligence services [Cockburn 2014].

3. The Sunni hate speech

There is no way to understand the formation of the so-called Islamic State without paying attention to the Arab Spring that began at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century. The materials disclosed by Edward Snowden, a former employee of the US National Security Agency (NSA) and private contractor of the Allen Booz Hamilton, have proven at least one thing. Even the biggest critics of actions of the United States' authorities, both from the radical left and right wing of the political scene – in their darkest visions did not imagine the actual extent of surveillance [Baranowski 2012], which was routinely carried out by the NSA, supported by the services of other states, especially the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) [Czapnik 2015]. Snowden, in a letter to two independent journalists, Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, profoundly stated: "The US government, in collusion with its dependent states, the most important of which is the UKUSA agreement (besides the United States) the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – has imposed a system of secret surveillance on the world that penetrates everything, and which it is impossible to hide from" [Greenwald 2014].

In light of the above, it is puzzling that hate-spreading Sunni preachers are acting without any obstacles. The US department of the treasury tried to detect and block funds flowing into movements similar to al-Qaeda worldwide. However, taking into account how these movements strengthened after 2001, these efforts should be considered futile. When trying to understand this failure, it must be noted that the attempt to break the secret infrastructure of holy war fighters, the special services did not address public support systems that support jihadists [Cockburn 2014a].

As the slogan of a certain jihadist website reads, "Half of Jihad is Media", which seems to be a valid statement. The ideas, activities and goals of the fundamentalist Sunni jihadists are spread day by day through TV stations, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. As long as these powerful means of propaganda function, al-Qaeda-like groups will always

have plenty of money and volunteers. Most of the hate propaganda is directed against the Shi'ites, less often against Christians, Sufis and Jews. It calls for support for jihad in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and everywhere the holy war is waged – as evidenced by, for example, the image of a romantically shown suicide bomber, who has become a "martyr" by attacking the Egyptian police station in Sinai. Looking at the posters and photos, not only their violence and sectarianism should be emphasized, but also professional production. Jihadists may call for a return to the norms of early Islam, but their abilities to use modern means of communication and the Internet far outweigh most political movements in the world.

It is worth looking at three photographs from Iraq. The first one shows two dead people in uniforms, with their hands tied behind their backs, lying on the cement floor. Blood is flowing from their heads – they have been shot in the head or their throats have been cut. The caption states: "The only cure for Shi'ites is a sword – victories in Al-Anbar". The second photograph presents two men standing over two bodies. The dead are members of the Sunni Awakening movement that fights al-Qaeda in the Salah ad Din Governorate. The third picture shows Iraqi soldiers holding the sign of their regiment, but its content has been changed in order to make it insult Sunnis: "God curses Omar and Abu Bakr (two early Sunni leaders) [Cockburn 2014a].

The calls for money for jihadists, the result of the activities of Sunni clerics and politicians, are more complicated. One of them proudly said that he collected $ 2.500 for every militant sent to Syria – he managed to recruit 12 thousand people. A photograph shows seven shelves with a different type of grenade on each of them. The caption underneath says: "Medicines for Shi'ites from the Mujahideen from Al-Anbar". The network of hate propaganda against Shi'ites is not limited to Twitter and Facebook accounts, but is also based on two Egyptian – although funded by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – TV stations, Safa and Wesal. The latter broadcasts in five languages – Arabic, Farsi, Kurdish, Indonesian and Hausa. Hatred preachers are extremely popular on YouTube. And so, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Zoghbi calls for the protection of Egypt against "criminal traitors and Shia criminals", as well as Jews and crusaders. The next sermon, titled: "Oh, Syria, the victory is near", says that President Assad "is seeking help from the Persians, Shi'ites, traitors and Shia criminals". Muhammad Ali Haji from the Center for Academic Shia Studies argues that 3.9 million of Saudi users of Facebook use them more frequently than US and UK users. The Internet allowed jihadists to establish close relationships with their financial and political supporters by sharing photographs and video materials [Cockburn 2014a].

Observers of the Syrian rebels said that they spend a lot of time on the Internet, from where they learn what is going on – identically to pro-government civilians. Films depicting the crimes of the other side reinforce confessional and political hatred, although some of them are fabricated. A Western journalist in a Syrian refugee camp in southeastern Turkey noted children watching a video supposedly showing Alawites cutting off heads of Sunni prisoners tied with a chain. However, in reality it was a material from Mexico where one drug baron cut his rivals' heads and published a film of the execution to scare away others. Further evidence for the impact of satellite televi-

sions and websites of jihadists come from captive sin Iraq, although it is worth remembering that prisoners usually say what their captors want to hear, but their confessions on Iraqi television sound reliable. Waleed bin Muhammad al-Hadi al-Masmoudi from Tunisia, an important supplier of foreign jihadists to Syria, said that he was a driver in his country. Al-Jazeera was supposedly a factor that helped him make a decision on participation in the holy war. Together with 13 other volunteers from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Yemen, he had no problem in reaching Fallujah. Abdullah Azam Salih al-Qahtani, a former Syrian officer, said that the Arab media and jihadist websites convinced him to go to Iraq. An interesting thread in interviews is the extent to which the war generates itself, as its veterans often lost brothers and other relatives earlier. Iraqi car mechanic, Sinan Abd Himood Nisaif al-Janabi, said he was deeply affected by the fact that the Americans, who had lost their soldiers in an attack, killed his brother [Cockburn 2014a].

4. Iraq: the triumph of sectarianism

According to Cockburn, two events show the differences between the reality and appearances in Iraq. The first is the takeover of Fallujah by ISIS in January 2014, which was supported by local tribal militias. This city – located just 40 miles west from Baghdad – was stormed by US *marines* in a bloody battle in 2004. A video shot from the air and depicting combatants targeted and eliminated by rockets started circling among government supporters shortly after. It was supposed to raise morale, but it turned out to be a fabricated material – filmed by American drones and helicopters fighting the Taliban. It is doubtful whether the Iraqi air forces are capable of carrying out similar attacks. The second event involved arrests of bodyguards of Sunni moderate finance minister Rafi al-Issawi towards the end of 2012, which resulted in peaceful protests in the Sunni provinces of northern and central Iraq. Sunnis make up about one fifth of the 33-million Iraqi population. The demonstrations attracted many people and the protesters demanded the end of political, social and economic discrimination against the Sunni community. It soon became clear that Prime Minister al-Maliki offered only cosmetic changes, and many people stopped attending the weekly demonstrations. In Sunni Tikrit, the capital of the Saladin Governorate, the protests initially gathered 10.000 people, but much fewer over time – only a thousand. As one local observer put it, it was decided that all mosques – except one – would be closed on Fridays, what forced the faithful to attend one temple. Cameras were supposed to record the crowd going to the mosque in a way suggesting that it was part of the protest – it was supposed to mislead donors from the Gulf who supported the demonstrations about the size of the demonstrations. An eyewitness from Tikrit cynically suggests that money allegedly spent on feeding and transporting non-existent demonstrators found their way to the pockets of protest leaders[2].

The above stories illustrate the political reality of contemporary Iraq well. Neither the government nor any constitutional political movement is as strong as it presents itself.

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[2] Information until the end of this subchapter – if not indicated otherwise – taken from: [Cockburn 2014c].

The power is divided, which contributed to the flourishing of the al-Qaeda. Its fighters in Fallujah have, as estimated, between 300 and 500 fighters, as well as people armed with sniper rifles on the outskirts of the city. Political winds are still favorable to them, and peaceful protests are weakening.

As the International Crisis Group (ICG) report puts it, reduced, demonized and increasingly subjected to repression by the central government, the popular movement is slowly transforming into armed struggle. More and more Sunni Arabs come to the conclusion that the only realistic option is violent conflict, increasingly perceived in confessional terms. The situation changed when the Arab Spring in Syria took the form of a revolt of the Sunni majority, supported by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey. Previously, the Iraqi Sunnis mostly renounced the Shia-Kurdish domination in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003. They feared the renewal of the slaughter organized by Shia militias and Shi'ite-controlled security forces, which largely drove Sunnis out of Baghdad during the sectarian civil war in 2006-2007. According to the telegram by the American Embassy in September 2007, most of the settlements in Baghdad consist mostly exclusively of Shi'ites. Sunnis escaped or concentrated in small enclaves surrounded by Shi'ite settlements. To a large extent it has remained so until this day. Many Iraqi Sunnis feel that there is no alternative to armed resistance, which was affected by the Sunni-Shi'ite conflict, as well as the cold war between Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies supported by the United States and Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, backed by Russia.

Iraq suspected the hidden influence of Wahhabism, which was supposed to destabilize the situation in the country. In an interview with France 24, Maliki blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar, claiming that these two countries are the main ones responsible for sectarianism, terrorism and the crisis in Iraq. His accusations were angrier than earlier, indicating that Riyadh and Doha support militants by buying weapons for terrorist organizations. Some of the Gulf States' reinforcements designed for Syrian militants certainly go to Iraq. Turkey allows weapons and jihadist volunteers and potential suicide bombers to go through its 500-mile border. ISIS operates freely in Iraq and Syria. According to the Iraq Body Count website, since mid 2012 the number of victims grew drastically, in 2013 9571 Iraqi civilians were killed, and in the first two months of 2014-2006. The number of suicide attacks reached even 30 per month. The US and Western powers supported the armed uprising in Syria, provoking a new round of sectarian civil war. The Al-Qaeda in Iraq was the weakest in 2010, when it was fought ruthlessly by the Americans and *Sahwa* (Awakening) groups, deriving mostly from Sunni tribes. The organization lost many veterans, dead or in prison, and the other free ones were unpopular due to the blood lust and the killing of even low-ranking government employees who could have been Sunni. In 2012 many Sunnis hoped to gain some concessions from the government without returning to war. The spectacular rebirth of al-Qaeda in Iraq took, among others, the form of systemic attacks on prisons. The campaign known as "Breaking the Walls" consisted of eight attacks on prisons, culminating in the release of at least 500 people from the Abu Ghraib and Taji prisons.

As a result of the attack by government forces on the peaceful gathering in Hawija (city southwest of Kirkuk) on April 23, 2013, 50 people were killed and 110 were wounded, and many Sunnis were alienated, including powerful tribes. Poorly planned government counteroffensives often relied on imprisonment and ill-treatment of men of conscription age. Sporadic shelling of Fallujah and Ramadi by the government forces in Al-Anbar Governorate forced half million of 1.6 million inhabitants to escape to more secure areas. The most important Sunni leader in Al-Anbar, Abdul Malak al-Saadi, who had previously advised moderation, stated that the parliamentary elections were unlawful. Election posters are torn off immediately after hanging. It is unclear to what extent ISIS controls Sunni areas, as it does not always want to manifest its presence. Its presence in the third most populous city, Mosul, is undoubtedly more important than in Fallujah, but little is reported about it. This is due to the killing campaign targeted at local journalists – five journalists have been killed since October 2013, and 40 fled to Kurdistan and Turkey. The mukhtars, the most important representatives of the government, and simultaneously leaders of local communities, are killed, forced to flee or collaborate with ISIS. Minorities such as Christians and Yazidis (followers of the syncretic religion that combines, among others, Zoroastrianism, Shia and Nestorian Christianity) are becoming a subject of violence in Mosul. ISIS has enough power to impose taxes on everyone – from people selling food on the streets to construction companies and mobile phone companies.

There are no signs of effective government counterattack. The slaughter of Shi'ite civilians continues. The security forces are unable to find and eliminate hiding places where bombings are prepared. Mahmoud Othamn, an experienced member of the parliament, said in 2013 that about half of the country is not controlled by the government. He wondered why the armed forces of 900.000 are so ineffective in the fight against ISIS. A politician, wishing to remain anonymous, stated that people pay money to get into the army in order to get more money – they are investors but not soldiers. Perhaps the wording is drastic, but it is clear that ISIS is stronger than ever before, controlling a large part of Sunni Iraq, and capable of carrying out murderous attacks in the rest of the country.

The Shi'ite political leadership in Iraq has been undermined due to the inability to block the takeover of Sunni areas by ISIS. The popular mobilization of Shi'ites consisted of people who came together under the slogan of defending Baghdad and the Shia holy places. Their partial success in the fight against ISIS triggered a response among young unemployed Shi'ites, who evaluated it in the context of the weakness of politicians located in the Green Zone. Lack of career prospects, and sometimes even primary education, makes joining the militia the only way for many young men to receive any income. Many of them led the anti-government demonstrations that took place in the summer 2015 [Iraq… 2015].

5. Syria: from the secular uprising to Jihad

36-year-old Razana Zaitouneh, who defended political prisoners for years, was this type of a credible advocate of the Syrian opposition, due to which she gained a lot of

international support. However, on December 8, 2013 armed men broke into her office in Douma and kidnapped her, along with her husband, Wael Hamada, and two human rights activists – lawyer Samir al-Khalili and poet Nazem al-Hamadi. There was no information about the all four. The Army of Islam, supported by the Saudis, is suspected of kidnapping, but it rejected this accusation. Al-Khalili's husband, Yassin al-Hajj Saleh, told the al-Monitor website that Razan and Samira were part of the national secular movement, which made them stand in the way of Islamic fractions striving for despotism. The abduction and disappearance of Zaitouneh and others is related to other events in Syria in which Islamists kill social activists or force them to flee. This usually happens when activists criticize them for murders, tortures, imprisonment of people and other crimes. All revolutions usually devour their earliest and most humane followers, but few have done it with such speed and ruthlessness. Instead of modernizing the Syrian society in a progressive and democratic manner, Salafi jihadists want to return to the norms of early Islam and are ready to fight in the holy war to achieve this goal [Cockburn 2014].

This raises the question of why the Syrian rebellion, whose early supporters demanded the replacement of tyranny by a secular, limited by law and democratic state, failed to achieve its goals. Syria has slipped into a cruel sectarian civil war because the government is bombarding its own cities as if they were an enemy's territory, and the armed opposition is dominated by Salafi jihadists who slaughter the Alawites and Christians solely because of their religion. The Syrians have to choose between a brutal dictatorship in which power is monopolized by the president and ruthless security services and an opposition that kills children for blasphemy and sends pictures of soldiers with their head cut to their parents. Syria now resembles Lebanon of the civil war years, 1975-1990. Cockburn visited Homs, a city known for its lively diversity, and now full of ghost settlements where all buildings have been abandoned, destroyed by firing and bombardments. Standing walls are full of small bullet holes from machine guns. Syria is a land of checkpoints, blockades and sieges where government forces encircle and bombard, but do not storm the rebel enclaves as long as they control important supply routes. This strategy works, although very slowly, and its side effect is leaving much of Syria in ruins [Cockburn 2014].

Syria has always been a less coherent society than it looked from the outside, and its divisions were not only religious. In July 2011, the ICG report stated that the Syrian authorities claimed that they were fighting the Islamic conspiracy supported from abroad, though they mostly led war against their own citizens. When the Assad regime was coming to power, it embodied the neglected people from provinces, peasants and exploited underclass. Currently, the ruling elite has forgotten its roots. During the four years of drought before 2011, the UN noted that three million of Syrian farmers had been pushed to extreme poverty, had left villages and settled in poverty districts on the outskirts of cities. Income of the middle class did not keep pace with inflation. Cheap imports, mainly from Turkey, drove small producers out of business and impoverished the urban working class. The state was in contact with whole areas of life solely through corrupt and ruthless security services. The ICG did not deny that there were Islamist movements in the uprising, but they did not decide about transforming peace-

ful protests into armed conflict. Ideologically, there are no major differences between Ahrar al-Sham and the Army of Islam, who demand the establishment of a Sunni theocratic state that would rule the Sharia. Jihadists were often greeted by local communities for restoring law and order, as they had previously been victims of looting and banditry supported by the FSA [Cockburn 2014]. For a more detailed analysis of the mechanisms of the initially secular uprising, one should refer to the book of the discussed author [Cockburn 2015].

Conclusion

Bombs and drones – undoubtedly –weakened ISIS, but its fighters did not fight to the end in the struggles for cities such as Ramadi and Palmyra, resorting to guerilla tactics. It is not without significance that the enemies of jihadists are very divided. The American coalition is trying to make the Syrian army and Shia militias not contribute to defeating ISIS. Kurdish leaders from Syria and Iraq agree on only one issue – when defeated ISIS leaves the Middle Eastern arena, they will be left at the mercy of Turkey and new regimes in Iraq and Syria. It is possible that in the face of the weaknesses of Iraqi Kurds and the Baghdad government's army, American special forces will have to help them. The Pentagon revealed that American artillery would support the attack on Mosul and the Peshmerga would receive aid of up to 415 million dollars [Cockburn 2016].

As we know from Karl Marx, people create their own history, but in condition they have not chosen. The establishment of self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq was not a necessary and inevitable event, but rather a result of a specific coincidence. This coincidence, if the above considerations are not misleading, allow at least to some extent to unravel Cockburn's texts. This author demonstrates that it is impossible to understand today's Middle East without knowing its – full of crimes, conspiracies and revolts – history. Proper perception of the establishment of the so-called Islamic State should be included in the long-term efforts to self-determination of the Middle Eastern peoples. Their aspirations are used by foreign powers – regional and global – that intervene in their domestic affairs. To a large extent it has unforeseen – and perhaps even unpredictable at the moment of taking action – effects, often very negative. For the sake of accuracy – as a result of the activity of the United States and the Russian Federation (mainly operations of air forces of these two countries), supported by local groups, including Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, which was symbolized by the fight for Kobani (however, it would be a mistake to think that airstrikes themselves would crush ISIS) [Cockburn 2015a] – they seriously weakened jihadists, but it is too early to predict the end of the self-proclaimed caliphate [Cockburn 2016a].

Conflict of interests

The author declared no conflict of interests.

Author contributions

Author contributed to the interpretation of results and writing of the paper. Author read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethical statement

The research complies with all national and international ethical requirements.

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