Socio-political and psychological preconditions for the protests in Tunisia and Egypt were extant in Syria as well. They had been ripening for a long time. Corruption of the state apparatus and at the top, the authoritarian nature of the regime and repressions by security agencies caused rejection on part of a significant part of the lower classes. The triad of Baathist ideology – unity, freedom, socialism – had worn out and lost its attractiveness. The monopoly of the Arab Socialist Renaissance Party (Baath) on power had become an anachronism for the population of the country that was open to the outside world and had a fairly high educational level.

A characteristic of the Syrian society was its confessional and ethnic heterogeneity. The majority was Muslim (86 percent), followed by Christians (10 percent) (half of them – Orthodox), Druze (3 percent) and others (1 percent). Of Muslims, 82 percent were Sunnis, the rest were Alawites, Ismailis, Shiites. It is believed that the Alawites, who constituted about a tenth of the population, numbered 2–2.5 million people. All these figures are not absolutely accurate and show an approximate ratio between different denominations.

Historically, the Sunni commercial and industrial stratum dominated the economy, and Alawites comprised the majority of the officer corps, the backbone of the Baath Party, and after a number of coups became the dominant force in the army, intelligence, security agencies and the state apparatus. As is usual in the East, power brings money, and the Sunni commercial and industrial bourgeoisie began to share economic welfare and influence with the Alawites.

The Kurds (with the total number of about 30 million people, or 40 million according to the Kurds themselves) are divided by the borders of the four states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In Syria, they constituted 10–12% of the population, that is, more than two million people. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Kurds moved here from Turkey. Most of them are concentrated in the northeast of the country, to a lesser degree – in an enclave north of Aleppo, on the border with Turkey, and partly in Aleppo itself. In Syria, the Kurds were in opposition to the nationalist Baathist regime. Their mood was influenced by the armed struggle of Turkish Kurds against Ankara and by the war of Iraqi Kurds against Baghdad, the latter leading to the emergence of an autonomous, practically independent Iraqi Kurdistan. Sometimes there were clashes between Kurds and Syrian law enforcement forces, but there were no major uprisings.
In Syria, there was no such extreme poverty as in Egypt, but the scandalous gap between the elite and the masses was growing.

From 2006 to 2011 Syria suffered an unprecedented drought. In some areas, up to 75 percent of the crop and 80–85 percent of livestock were destroyed, which endangered the lives of approximately one million people. There began a mass exodus of peasants and nomads to the cities. In 2011, 200,000 people moved to Aleppo. In addition, in the 2000s, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees emigrated to Syria following the American invasion of Iraq. All this destabilized the social situation.

Economic development still continued at the end of the 2000s, but high demographic growth reduced the per capita income. In Syria, as in other Arab countries, a “youth bulge” was formed. Unemployment was increasing, especially among the young people, including university graduates.

The younger generation was partially depoliticized. The bloody wars in Lebanon and Iraq seemed to convince many that stability and security were something that should not be destroyed. The Union of Syrian students held a pro-government position. However, the mood of the youth was also determined by pan-Arab TV channels.

President Bashar Asad is relatively young. In 2011, he was 45 years old. He positioned himself as an anti-Western and, indeed, anti-Israeli leader, but simultaneously was open to reforms. In Syria, many viewed the fall of Egyptian President Mubarak as evidence of the collapse of a pro-American leader who became an ally of Israel.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, attempts were made in Syria to reform and democratize the system. Some representatives of the opposition were released from prisons, including even some of the Muslim Brothers. The authorities expected to strengthen relations with the young business elite and the intelligentsia, including its Sunni Muslim part.

The reform plans were opposed by the conservative “old guard”, which feared that rapid changes would destabilize the political situation and undermine their former influence and privileges.

Yet the Charter of the Baath Party was amended in 2009, and came to include items on democratic reforms, human rights, pluralism. The influence of the party on state institutions was reduced. In Syria, a fairly wide range of opposition was allowed, which supported democratic transformations within peaceful political struggle.

Steps were taken to introduce market relations, reduce the role of the state in the economy, open private banks and exchanges in Damascus, and abolish subsidies for bread, rice, other food products, fuel oil. This opened up a possibility for creating a healthier economy, although it lowered the living standard of the population, which affected the social situation.

The regime managed to maintain the loyalty of the army and security forces, as well as the loyalty of not just the Alawites but also of Christians and of many Sunnis. “The Alawi-Sunni division should not be overstated”, writes American researcher C. Phillips. “While sectarian resentment existed among some Sunnis toward some Alawis, and some Alawis reciprocated, it would be inaccurate to say...
these feelings were widespread and prominent across both communities . . . . Not all Alawis sided with the regime, not all Sunnis sided with the opposition, and not all Syrians were motivated by ethno-sectarian concerns”.

The supporting structures of the secular nationalist regime had so far remained quite strong: the security agencies, the Baath party discipline, the link between the party and the state apparatus and the generally recognized religious tolerance in Syria. But the tension was growing.

The secular state, which ensured religious tolerance and, despite the outbreak of violence three to four decades ago, peaceful cohabitation of various faiths, was under threat. Despite the resistance of the conservatives in the leadership of the country and the party, the regime had not exhausted the potential for reforms and transformation – but only in peaceful conditions. This was not a priority for its opponents. The main task was to dismantle the awkward regime.

The vicious circle of violence

The first anti-government protests in Syria began on 26 January 2011. They were not mass. The mass demonstrations broke out on March 15 in the provincial centre of Daraa, lying on the road between Damascus and Jordan. The standard demands included reforms, democratic freedoms, the lifting of the state of emergency. There were clashes with the police. The opposition and foreign information resources claimed that the police arrested and beat teenagers for their anti-government graffiti on the walls. The government side claimed that it had immediately found arms depots and that there had been first dead among the law enforcement officers. Without delay there appeared armed provocateurs – snipers in the ranks of the opposition. They fired at their own. Be that as it may, the protests began to engulf an increasing number of cities, so the Syrian army engaged in their suppression.

Some researchers believe that the president was late with the reforms. It is easy to criticize the Syrian leadership years later. The feature of the protest movements of this kind, which have steady support from abroad, is growing demands: after the first concession, there come new demands. The Syrian president personally apologized to the families of the victims. At the end of March, Asad replaced the government, which had been in place since 2003, and abolished the state of emergency. In late May, many political prisoners were amnestied. He began to change provincial governors. Approximately 200,000 Kurds gained Syrian citizenship.

There emerged a vicious circle in the country: protests, violence, new protests, escalating armed clashes between opponents and supporters of the regime.

Governments of Western countries, monarchies of the Persian Gulf, and Turkey sided with the opposition. In the summer of 2011, they were too busy to engage in Syria, but Western ambassadors in Damascus behaved quite provocatively: they directly communicated with the opposition and encouraged it to act against the regime.

The Syrian unrest had its own logic and dynamics. Syrian Islamists did not forget how in 1982, in response to the terrorist attacks by the Muslim Brotherhood, Hafez Asad (the father of the current president) drowned their uprising in the city
of Hama in the blood of thousands of victims. The heirs of that uprising had their own accounts to settle with the Alawites, the Asad family and his entourage. They immediately began to arm themselves with support from abroad. It was clear that almost the nearly bloodless Egyptian or Tunisian scenarios would not be repeated in Syria.

Let me refer to the opinion of a man outside politics: Archimandrite Alexander (Elisov), the representative of the Patriarch of Moscow to the Patriarch of Antioch, who believed that the cause of the unrest in Syria was internal problems that had become the ground for stirring up the conflict from outside:

The stagnation of political life in Syria had created a lot of negativity in society: corruption, rudeness of officials, lack of rights when dealing with the state apparatus, and so on, which could not but arouse the discontent of the middle class and low-income citizens. I believe that this had created a favourable ground for unrest. However, the wick had been lit from the outside. The military riots acquired special intensity after the end of the active phase of the Libyan campaign.8

At the beginning of the riots there were neither leaders nor structures opposed to the government. But “the wick had been lit from the outside”. The regime of Bashar Asad became the object of a ruthless information war, which was conducted against the Baathist regime by Western TV channels, together with Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, which were supported by almost all TV channels in the Arab countries and print media. All of them were fanning the fire. Since the beginning of the unrest, this information war has only been escalating.

There were also significant pro-government demonstrations in Syria, which often led to clashes with the opposition. The clashes were becoming more fierce, with an increasing number of casualties. In January 2012, fighting took place in the suburbs of Damascus, and the city of Rastan changed hands several times. There was also fighting in Homs, with mixed results.

In the framework of the tasks set by the author, it is almost impossible to give a detailed description of the civil war, which has already lasted for about six years.

We will touch only on some key events to highlight the main topic – Russia’s position on Syria.

In July 2011, military defectors and individual armed rebels, many of whom belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, announced the establishment of the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA). It did not have a joint command, although some Syrian groups from abroad tried to pretend to be such, and found a shelter in Turkey – in the province of Hatay, near the border with Syria. Armed opposition groups inside the country refused to obey orders from abroad and acted independently. The army as a whole maintained loyalty to the regime, although the majority of servicemen were Sunnis, not Alawites.

The fact that the opposition was scattered, motley and did not have a single leadership made it easier for the regime. The rebels comprised about a thousand groups, which formed around some local leader or around a common ideology.
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Personal and ideological differences, in particular – about the role of Islam and jihadism, about the acceptability of external interference, increased the disunity of the opposition. In 2013, the Carter Centre determined that there were 1,050 groups and 3,250 sub-groupings of armed opposition.\(^9\)

In early October 2011 in Istanbul, upon the initiative of Paris and Doha, several dozen emigrants created the so-called Syrian National Council (SNC), supposedly secular in nature. However, the Syrian “Muslim Brotherhood” started to play a significant role in the SNC.

Ankara mistakenly exaggerated their influence in Syria and began to support them actively. The internal Syrian opposition, both armed and peaceful, for the most part simply ignored the SNC, and its organizers simply moved from one luxury hotel to another, from one capital to another, pretending to be the future government of Syria in order to receive financial support. The SNC advocated a “Libyan option”, that is, a foreign military intervention to overthrow the Baathist regime. Its attempts to appropriate the political leadership of the Free Syrian Army did not find a response.

In the international arena, the opponents of Asad’s regime formed the “Group of Friends of Syria”. The initiative was shown by the USA and France, and they were supported by the secretariat of the League of Arab States (LAS), in which Qatar was gaining a growing influence. After the Group was formed in Tunisia in February 2012, it met in the capitals of various states that were interested in exerting maximum pressure on the government of Syria and supporting the opposition. The number of the “friends” of the opposition, and therefore of the “enemies” of the regime, grew to 114 countries, but only the 11 most “persistent” ones (from the US and Britain to Qatar and Turkey) took part in the meeting held in May 2014 in London. The “Friends of Syria” publicly discussed the issue of arms supplies to the opposition, although they had already been supplying it behind the scenes. The main holdup was to decide which group to help and to supply with weapons.

The whole “group” acted outside the UN and often tried to revise agreements reached even between Russia and the United States.

At the meeting of the “Group of Friends of Syria” in Istanbul on 1 April 2012, the SNC was recognized as the “legal representative” of all Syrians and the “umbrella” organization of the Syrian opposition. It was understood that the SNC was to “direct” the struggle against the regime. However, soon the West began to lose its trust in the SNC, which had very little effect on the processes that were taking place inside the country.

On 11 November 2012 in Doha, the so-called National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces was set up, again mainly from emigrants. This was done upon the initiative of France and Qatar. Its main theses included the refusal to carry out a dialogue with the authorities, the overthrow of Bashar Asad personally,\(^10\) as well as of the political regime in Syria in general. The programme for further action was vague. The SNC joined it, receiving 22 seats out of 60, but in January 2014 it left the Coalition when it was ignored in the course of negotiations with the Syrian government.
The new coalition during its inauguration announced that it rejected extremism and aimed at preventing violations of human rights and crimes by all opposition groups.

Inside the National Coalition itself, there began a struggle for power. There were quarrels between the “pro-Qatari” and “pro-Saudi” factions. Riyadh and Doha competed in the Arab world and, in particular, in Syria. Saudi Arabia became the main sponsor of the new coalition.

Unexpectedly for the Western powers, the National Coalition was not “recognized” by many of the opposition groups that were fighting in Syria. At the end of September 2013, 13 major rebel groups rejected the supremacy of the National Coalition and withdrew from the Free Syrian Army. They formed their own military alliance of radical jihadists called the Islamic Coalition. Many of them at one time had received military assistance from the United States.

Rebels were provided with assistance on an ever-increasing scale. As early as in December 2011, a former CIA counter-terrorism specialist and military intelligence officer, Philip Giraldi, stated that NATO military aircraft without identification arrive at Turkish bases near the Syrian border, delivering weapons from the stockpiles of the late Muammar Gaddafi, as well as volunteers from the National Transitional Council of Libya. Instructors of French and British special forces help Syrian rebels, while CIA and US special forces supply communication and information equipment to the rebels to help their cause.

He noted that CIA analysts were sceptical about the data on the killing of civilians by the government forces because this information was based on rebel sources and could not be verified.

In 2012, there were reports that the US conducted covert operations, helping armed groups against the Asad government. As a result of the US Train and Equip Program, the fighters sent to Syria sold their weapons or joined the Islamic State.

Most of the countries of the League of Arab States (LAS) led by Qatar took a position hostile to the official Damascus. In November 2011, LAS imposed economic sanctions against Syria and banned the entry of a number of Syrian officials into the LAS member countries. At the same time, the European Union imposed additional sanctions against Syria.

On 6 March 2013, the League of Arab States gave a green light to its members, urging them to arm rebels in Syria. On 26 March 2013, at the Doha summit, the Arab League recognized the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

However, during the first stage of the crisis, the Arab League tried to demonstrate “objectivity”. To reduce the intensity of the conflict in Syria and to open the door for negotiations, it set up a special monitoring Mission headed by the Sudanese General Mohammed al-Dabi, which began to act on the basis of a protocol signed between LAS and Damascus in November 2011. After a while, the
Mission of the League prepared a report, which fairly objectively reflected the situation in the country. It also mentioned facts unpleasant for the Syrian government. But the “Friends of Syria” did not like this document, because it objectively showed that the Syrian government had both supporters and opponents, noted the distortion of facts by international media, recorded crimes of the armed opposition in Syria, including the Free Syrian Army, which the West exhibited as “fighters for democracy” against the “tyrannical regime”.

That is why the Western members of the UN Security Council rejected the Russian proposal to consider and approve the report of the LAS Mission to the UN Security Council.

Through their allies in the Persian Gulf states, Western countries asked General Al-Dabi to resign, in order to replace him with a more suitable figure. They allegedly tried to bribe him. That did not work. But just at that moment Sudan, in the hope of receiving substantial assistance, reoriented its cooperation with Iran to Saudi Arabia, and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir recalled General Al-Dabi to Khartoum.

In early 2012, the work of the LAS Mission was discontinued. Thus, the first attempt to create a mechanism for honest monitoring of the situation in Syria in order to reduce the intensity of the conflict ended in failure.19

Neither the armed opposition nor its patrons needed peace talks. From the very beginning, the armed opposition bet on a foreign military intervention under the “Libyan” scenario, and its sponsors hoped for a rapid fall of the regime.

However, another attempt was made to find an impartial mediator. On February 23, 2012, Ban Ki-moon appointed his predecessor, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the Special Envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League in Syria. The move was supported by Russia. The goal was to achieve a politico-diplomatic settlement of the conflict.

On 21 April 2012, the Security Council passed a resolution on sending 300 unarmed UN observers to Syria.

Kofi Annan proposed a six-point peace plan, which included a ceasefire, the start of a political dialogue and the stabilization of the situation in the country under UN control. The truce was announced on 12 April 2012. Although from the very beginning it was fragile, the Syrian government conducted parliamentary elections on a multi-party basis in the government-held parts of the country. A bloc led by the Baathists won the elections.

There took place a partial withdrawal of government troops and heavy equipment from populated areas. After the ceasefire was declared, representatives of the UN Mission arrived at the country. Its head, the Norwegian general Robert Mood, attempted to be objective. In a number of districts, local truces were concluded.20 However, there were still outbreaks of violence on both sides.

“In the course of numerous contacts with the Syrian opposition, Russian diplomats called upon Asad’s opponents to comply with the provisions of Annan’s plan”, wrote the Russian diplomat and researcher M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva. “However, the oppositionists replied that other external players tell them completely
the opposite things. Namely – “do not lay down your weapons”, “abroad will help you”.

“Various attempts at a ceasefire during the implementation of the LAS plan and the plan of Kofi Annan failed in part because external actors exerted little pressure on their Syrian allies to observe this ceasefire, and even actively supported the task of disrupting the ceasefire”, writes C. Phillips.

The mission honestly reported on the breakdown of the ceasefire and on numerous crimes of the rebels. This impeded the formation of a virtual “reality” of the situation in Syria with the help of mass media.

The rebels began to attack the UN representatives and blow up their cars. Their mission became almost impossible. On 29 July 2012, the UN Security Council extended the work of the Mission for only 30 days. On 2 August 2012, Kofi Annan resigned. He said that there was no military solution to the Syrian crisis, and only Russia and the United States could find a way out of the impasse. On 1 September 2012, the post of the Special Representative of the UN and the Arab League for Syria was handed over to the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, who carried out his mission until 31 May 2014.

In mid-2012, the Western powers still counted on a military solution in the hope of a rapid fall of Bashar Asad.

On 22 June 2012, the Syrian air-defence forces shot down a Turkish F-4 fighter over the territorial waters of Syria. Not wishing to give reasons for Turkey’s direct intervention in the war, Bashar Asad publicly apologized for the incident. Demonstrating solidarity with Turkey, NATO handed over several batteries of Patriot surface-to-air missile launchers to Turkey. The same American air-defence systems were later delivered to Jordan.

In the summer of 2012, the rebels were advancing. The fighting reached residential quarters of the capital. On 18 July 2012, Syrian Defence Minister Dawoud Rajiha and several other high-ranking military, including the head of the country’s intelligence, were killed in a terrorist attack. The rebels were pushed out of the centre of Damascus in July 2012, but the fighting continued on the outskirts.

In the meantime, attention shifted to Aleppo, where the fighting produced mixed results, and the government was able to retain control only over a part of the city. The rebels seized control points on the Syrian-Turkish border, which provided them with an unimpeded supply of assistance through Turkey.

In late October 2012, the new representative of the UN and the LAS, L. Brahimi, organized a truce for the duration of Eid al-Adha, the Muslim sacrifice feast, but it quickly fell apart.

In the first months of the conflict, while government forces still were in the Kurdish areas, there were clashes between them and the rebelling Kurds. Clashes were also taking place later, but rarely. The situation was complicated by the fact that anti-regime Islamist groups became real enemies of the Kurds as well.

After the withdrawal of the government troops from the Kurdish regions, local rebels became de facto allies of Damascus, especially when the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratî, PYD, which was the real
authority in the Kurdish enclave), the People’s Protection Units (Yekoneyên Parastina Gel; YPG) (up to 15,000 fighters)\textsuperscript{25} started to play a crucial role. The PYD worked closely with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK), which led the armed struggle of the Turkish Kurds against Ankara, which predetermined a sharply negative attitude of the Turkish government towards it. The YPG successfully fought against jihadists and, like Iraqi Kurds, began to receive US military assistance. The relations between the USA, Turkey, the Kurds and the jihadists were becoming increasingly more confused.

Alongside the sub groupings of the amorphous Free Syrian Army, there fought increasingly more numerous groups of Islamists, among whom Jabhat al-Nusra gained especial strength. Western states shied away from supporting it simply because it officially declared itself to be a branch of Al-Qaeda. Jabhat al-Nusra spread its influence both in the eastern part of the country and in most of Idlib and Aleppo provinces.

From November 2012 to April 2013, the armed opposition enjoyed significant successes in various areas of Syria. The fighting returned to Damascus itself. The rebels seized residential quarters – the Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk. Aleppo was even more isolated from the capital. Units of the Free Syrian Army infiltrated the coastal province of Latakia via Turkey.

In February 2013, when there emerged a threat to transport links between Damascus and Lebanon, the armed forces of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which feared the loss of its ally and patron – the Syrian regime, interfered with the support of Iran. They engaged units of the Free Syrian Army and were able to occupy the city of Al-Qusayr, which ensured government control over most of the Syrian-Lebanese border.

However, in the east of the country the situation did not favour the government. The rebels seized the provincial centre – the city of Raqqa – and most of the oil fields.

In April–August 2013, government troops made some advances, including even in the province of Idlib. The government forces retook some quarters of the capital from the rebels. Kurdish detachments in the northeast of the country and in the city of Aleppo clashed with the Islamists.

At that time, an international crisis erupted, which concerned the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta oasis near Damascus. This crisis will be described further in the present book.

The pendulum of victories and failures of the warring countries swung throughout the last months of 2013.

**Small and big monsters**

The bitterness of the warring sides in the first year of the civil war was off-scale. During the fighting near the Syrian city of Al-Qusayr, one of the rebel commanders demonstratively committed cannibalism, eating the heart and liver of a killed soldier of the government troops in front of cameras. He urged the rebels to mercilessly kill the Alawites and devour their hearts. Even
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anti-Syrian TV channels in the West were embarrassed by the video footage of cannibalism.

However, all these cruelties paled in comparison with what the growing forces of Islamist extremists were doing. The secular component of the opposition, represented by the troops of the Free Syrian Army and foreign intellectuals and organizations, was eroding. The “Muslim Brothers”, who had been active in the ranks of the Free Syrian Army, were transferring to extremist groups. The ranks of the opposition included hundreds of jihadist groups, which easily transferred from one organization to another, especially when they were offered a better pay.

Jabhat al-Nusra was established in January 2012. It was joined by volunteer mercenaries from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan, Lebanon, Turkey, France, Britain and Russia. Al-Nusra established control over a large part of the densely populated province of Idlib, the eastern districts of Syria, parts of Aleppo, Homs, some residential quarters of the capital and part of the Ghouta oasis near Damascus. Under its control was the Syrian part of the Golan Heights, where they took hostage UN peacekeepers, but released them, retaining their weapons.26

In November 2013 Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri announced that the only “legitimate” representative of Al-Qaeda in Syria was Jabhat al-Nusra.27 It was recognized as a terrorist organization by the UN, Russia, the US and a number of other states.

Its assaults were lead by suicide bombers, who committed dozens of terrorist attacks. At times, it acted (in Aleppo) alongside the fighters of the Free Syrian Army, at times it simply incorporated these rebels, and at time it fought against the FSA.

In total, Jabhat al-Nusra had over 6,000 fighters.

In 2015, Jabhat al-Nusra and its allies took control of the entire province of Idlib, including its capital. Fighters from Russia and Central Asia swore fealty to the group. It was also bolstered by some of the FSA fighters. The US airstrikes against its positions in Syria did not do much harm, but increased its popularity among the Islamists.

In 2013, among the ranks of the armed Syrian opposition, there appeared an even more powerful, merciless and super-fanatical group – “the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL).

Its origins and main base were in Iraq, where the three provinces of the “Sunni Triangle” were in opposition to the Shiite government in Baghdad. Let us note, without going to deep into history, that in 2006 the extremists that had split from Al-Qaeda formed “the Islamic State in Iraq”. After its founders were killed, it was headed by a “preacher” who called himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.28

In 2013, it intervened in the Syrian civil war and in April of the same year adopted the name “the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” – ISIL (ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī ‘l-‘Irāq wa-sh-Shām – DAESH). The Levant is the Europe translation of the name of historical Syria (ash-Sham), which covers the present-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine – Israel, part of Jordan). We will use this abbreviation to avoid confusion, as the name of the organization has changed to the “Islamic State”, and then to the “Caliphate”.

In the opinion of Sheikh Ravil Gainutdin, one should use the Arab abbreviation – DAESH – because the name “Islamic state” is politically incorrect. In some Western, Turkish and Arab media, the name DAESH has become widespread. It is also used in Russian language, not in Russia, but in Kazakhstan. The Russian media have continued the use of the term ISIL.

According to some information, ISIL created Jabhat al-Nusra as its branch in Syria. Yet the two organizations quickly separated. There was a rivalry between their leaders, struggle for sources of financing and armaments, as well as a certain difference of goals in the context of common ideology: ISIL declared its objective to create the “world caliphate” at least in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire, while al-Nusra was focused on first gaining control of Syria. The differences resulted in clashes in January–February 2014, in which approximately 3,300 fighters were killed from two sides. Al-Nusra swore its loyalty to Al-Qaeda, breaking off its relations with ISIL.

In 2014, ISIL achieved its greatest success in Iraq. On 10 June 2014, it captured Mosul, the second largest city in the country. The Iraqi army (more than 2 divisions) simply fled, leaving its weapons behind. In the Mosul offices of the Central Bank of Iraq, extremists seized the cash – from 0.5 to 1 billion dollars. Then they took the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah and nearly approached Baghdad. According to the author’s sources in Iraq, at that moment the United States began to hold up arms supplies to Baghdad, insisting on the resignation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who had connections with Iran. The short-term political objective overshadowed the strategic vision of the Americans: there was a more serious threat at the door. The active and rapid supply of Russian weapons to the Iraqi government played an important role in the successful defence of Baghdad. On 29 June 2014 in Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the creation of the “Caliphate”, and appointed himself “Caliph”. The offensive of ISIL in Syria was lightning-fast. It captured eastern regions of the country, then Raqqa, which became its capital, Palmyra, parts of Damascus, Aleppo and Idlib province. ISIL fighters appeared even in Lebanon. In January 2014, they fought units of the Free Syrian Army and al-Nusra in the cities of Idlib and Aleppo.

Having recognized ISIL as a terrorist organization, in September 2014 the US established a coalition that began airstrikes against its positions in Iraq, and then – without the consent of the government in Damascus – in Syria. The bombing did not result in significant successes. The Americans began to supply weapons to the Free Syrian Army. The Kurds both in Iraq and in Syria turned out to be an efficient force against ISIL, and they started to receive US assistance. At the end of 2014, there was heavy fighting between ISIL and Kurdish militiamen for the city of Kobani on the border with Turkey. The city is populated mainly by Kurds.

The total area controlled by ISIL in Syria and Iraq at the end of 2014 was estimated at 40–90,000 square kilometres. It had the population of about eight million. On 11 December 2015, Russia’s Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu reported that ISIL had captured about 70 percent of the territory of Syria, mainly the desert, and the total number of ISIL fighters was 60,000 people.
IGIL set itself a super task – to establish a caliphate in the territories that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Among other goals was the destruction of the Hamas organization and the State of Israel, the destabilization of Central Asia.

The backbone of the military organization consisted of former Saddam Hussein’s Baathist officers, who had lost their livelihood in Iraq.

In September 2014, CIA put the estimate of the number of fighters at 20–31,500 people. In September 2014, the head of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation mentioned the figure of 30–50,000 fighters. According to the US intelligence community, the total number of foreigners in the group was at least 16,000. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, there were more than 25,000 foreign fighters fighting under the banner of ISIL in November 2015. US sources put the figure at about 30,000.

There were different assessments of the budget of the organization, but smuggling of oil from captured fields in Iraq and Syria for a while was the main source of income. The oil was mainly sold in Turkey. According to the US Treasury, oil revenues were about $40 million a month. The bank robberies brought the organization, as indicated above, $0.5–1 billion. Other income came from robbery, hostage ransoms, assistance from donors from rich countries of the Arabian Peninsula, drug trafficking and trade in artefacts. It is important to note that donor assistance, although significant, was not the basis of ISIL budget.

Thousands of Yazidi women and children were enslaved, they were sold as sex slaves. ISIL even published a collection of rules for the treatment of slaves.

ISIL created a powerful propaganda structure, broadcasted news in several languages, recruited supporters through the Internet, produced movies.

In March 2015, the UN published a report which said: “The Islamic State (i.e. ISIL – A.V.) did not spare any community in Iraq. The Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen, Sabians-Mandaens, Kurds, Shiites and representatives of other communities, including Sunni, were subjected to violence”. According to the report, “the destruction of Yazidis could be qualified as genocide”. In the summer of 2015, ISIL militants killed 500 Yazidi men and captured about 300 women in slavery. There were mass executions, ethnic cleansing, the use of child soldiers, forced conversion of non-Muslims into Islam. ISIL militants encouraged girls and women of other faiths to engage in prostitution. There were official slave markets. The militants destroyed historical monuments, religious shrines and attacked infrastructure facilities. According to the authors of the report, the actions of ISIL could be qualified as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity. The report focused on Iraq, but practically the same information was available for Syria.

The terrorist attacks organized by ISIL took place not only in Syria and Iraq, but also in Turkey, France, Tunisia, Kuwait, the USA, Russia, Indonesia, Belgium, Yemen, Bangladesh, Germany.

They made executions of hundreds of prisoners into theatrical performances, uploading videos on the Internet. Women, including pregnant women, were also executed. In the Iraqi city of Mosul, two homosexuals were thrown off the roof of a building. They executed teenagers for watching football on television. ISIL beheaded foreign journalists and humanitarian workers and showed the
beheadings on video. In July 2015, teenage militants shot dead 25 captive Syrian soldiers in the amphitheatre of Palmyra. People were crucified on crosses, tied to jeeps and dragged along the road, dissolved alive in containers with acid, dismembered alive, burned alive. Prisoners were subjected to monstrous tortures.

In the occupied territories, ISIL established a quasi-state with security agencies, army, courts, schools, hospitals and the tax system. Despite the chimerical plans and medieval rhetoric, it was a temporary but real structure.

The author draws the most schematic picture of the civil war in Syria. Perhaps, other researchers will focus and are focusing on other events. Syria, as a whole, resembled a patchwork quilt. In some areas, cities, villages, oases, power changed hands many times, or there emerged anarchy.

Our focus is Russia’s take on the events, which this chapter examines until 30 September 2015, when, at the request of the Syrian government, Russia openly interfered into the conflict by the means of its aerospace forces. Russian assistance to the government of Syria – weapons on the basis of previous agreements, some – even from Soviet times, continued, despite the events taking place. Economic, humanitarian and financial assistance was directed. At the moment there are no official figures. We will focus more on the diplomatic component of Russian politics in the Syrian conflict.

Russian assistance to the government of Syria, which included arms deliveries on the basis of previous agreements, some of which went back to the Soviet times, never ceased despite all the developments. Russia dispatched economic, humanitarian and financial assistance. At the moment there are no official figures. We will focus more on the diplomatic component of Russian politics in the Syrian conflict.

We will discuss the position and initiatives of the Russian Federation at the UN and related organizations, the attempts to find common ground in Syria with the US, other Western partners, regional players, and the limited successes and failures of these attempts.

But first let us analyze the other participants of the Syrian tragedy. The picture will be incomplete if we ignore the regional and global aspects of the civil war in Syria.

Regional and global actors

It is understandable why Syrian emigrants, who had adopted Western liberal values and were thirsty for power, dreamed of overthrowing the Baathist regime. It is clear why Bashar Asad was considered an enemy by the United States and its allies, including Israel. According to the Wall Street Journal, the United States had established contacts with Syrian power structures and the state apparatus in order to try to carry out a military coup in the country and remove Asad from power.

It is understandable why Saudi Arabia, fearing the strengthening of its rival – Shiite Iran – actively supported the opposition. But what kind of veil fell on the eyes of the leaders of Turkey and Qatar, whose families had been friends with the family of the president of Syria? It sounds strange when they call for "democratic
reforms”. Their positions were predetermined by ideology, the hope for the ascen-
sion of affiliated Islamists to power, as it has been the case for a period of time in
Egypt. As the author’s Syrian sources told him, both the then prime minister of
Turkey Erdogan and the emir of Qatar Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani were persuad-
ing Asad to include the Muslim Brotherhood in the government, which would
precisely mean “reforms and promotion of democracy”.

In fact, Doha counted on a more significant role for this tiny but super-rich
country in the Arab arena. Qatar sent six combat aircraft to Libya and established
good links with jihadists. As a result of the killing of Gaddafi and the “victory” of
the opposition, the self-conceit of the Qatari leadership rose.

The Turkish leadership was gripped by neo-Ottoman dreams and hopes to turn
Syria into some sort of a Turkish protectorate. At that time, it seemed that the
Arab Spring was beneficial to Turkey, in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood was
gaining influence in Egypt. Like Western leaders, Recep Erdogan was mistaken,
believing that the Syrian regime was about to collapse. Ankara considered the
Arab Spring as an opportunity to strengthen Turkish influence in the new regional
order.51

Both regional countries and Western powers exaggerated the political weight of
the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, counted on a rapid fall of the regime, did not take
into account its real steadiness and hoped for a possible “Libyan option” – a direct
foreign intervention. In August 2011, the United States, Great Britain, France,
Germany and Canada jointly demanded that Asad resign. They underestimated
the impact of this step on both the Syrian government and the situation as a whole.
Many in the region believed that the next step would be a military operation,
similar to the Libyan one, against Syria. Many regional and local actors – Qatar,
Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the opposition – hoped for an intervention of Western
countries. However, the US did not know and did not understand the situation in
Syria.52

The erroneous assessment that the regime was about to collapse was one of the
main reasons that pushed for increasing pressure on Damascus. Western leaders
became captives of their own rhetoric and misjudgment of the rapidly developing
events of the Arab Spring, and their call for the resignation of Asad seemed as an
obvious step to them and their regional allies. Why look for a compromise if the
regime falls soon, and if it stays, it will be swept away by a Western intervention?

The European Union, the League of Arab States, as well as the US, Turkey,
Canada and Australia, introduced expanded economic sanctions against Syria. The
Arab League froze relations with the Central Bank and the government of Syria.53
The Emir of Qatar was the first to say that the insurgents should be armed.54

But in any case, the forces that united against the Syrian government supported
the disparate opposition diplomatically, politically, with money and weapons.

Who and how helped the opposition in Syria, and what opposition was an open
secret. But rarely did such frank assessments sound as from the lips of US Vice
President Joe Biden.

“Our biggest problem was our allies”, Vice President Biden told students at
the Harvard Kennedy School in October 2014. “The Turks . . . the Saudis, the
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Emirates, etc, what were they doing? They were so determined to take down (Syrian President Bashar al) Asad and . . . essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tonnes of weapons into anyone who would fight against Asad”. “These policies ended up helping militants linked to Al-Qaeda and ultimately IS”, he said.55

A BBC correspondent wrote, “The issue was not so much in what he said – Obama administration officials have long been making similar complaints – but that he said it publicly just as the US has secured regional support for a coalition against Islamic State (IS) militants. His comments also exposed very different views between the US and Syria’s neighbours about who’s to blame for the rise of IS”.56

The US itself allegedly did not arm the opposition. But soon scandalous facts were revealed. It turned out that in Turkey, the Americans trained and armed fighters of the “moderate” Syrian opposition. On 21 September 2015, 75 US-trained fighters in 12 pickups with machine guns and a large number of military equipment crossed the Turkish border and . . . joined Jabhat al-Nusra. The Americans had trained them, among other things, for military operations against ISIL. They had been planning to train more than 5,000 fighters at the cost of $0.5 billion, but, having received such a resounding slap, curtailed the program.57

That was September 2015. But then, in 2014, Ankara’s incandescent response and objections from the United Arab Emirates led Mr Biden to “clarify” that he “didn’t mean the allies had intentionally facilitated the growth of IS or other violent extremists”.58

His “apologies” did not change the facts. However, Ankara accepted the apology of J. Biden, and in the autumn of 2014 the Turkish parliament allowed the use of force in Syria, which opened the way for Turkey’s more active role in the coalition against ISIL.

There was no doubt that the flow of weapons and money for the rebels came to Syria from the countries indicated by Biden. US officials and analysts specializing in regional issues have long pointed out the direct financial support to extremist groups by donors from the Gulf States. At the official level, the Gulf countries led by Saudi Arabia openly announced their support for arming the rebels in the early stages of the conflict. Some of them supported Islamist groups. In mosques, sermons openly called for donations and volunteers to fight in Syria.

The involvement by Saudi Arabia in the Syrian civil war consisted in the supply of weapons and equipment to various rebel groups.59 In December 2012, Saudi Arabia began delivering weapons of Yugoslav origin from Croatia to the Syrian opposition.60 Deliveries intensified in the summer of 2013. They were allegedly managed by Bandar bin Sultan, the former ambassador of the Kingdom to the United States, and then head of the Saudi Intelligence Agency. After the failures of the rebels, he was removed from this post.

Qatar and Turkey provided support to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist armed groups. Qatar’s foreign minister Dr Khalid Bin Moham- mad Al-Attiya went so far as to tell a 2012 forum at the International Institute for Security Studies that he was “very much against excluding anyone
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(from the struggle against the Asad regime) at this stage, or bracketing them as Al-Qaeda”.  

As officials from the US presidential administration claimed, part of what the US supplied fell into the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra. Qatar was often named the main source of funding for ISIL. On 22 August 2014, German politician Gerhard Muller directly accused Qatar of this. The Qatari authorities claimed that they were financing only “moderate” Syrian opposition.  

The Financial Times reported that Qatar gave the opposition from $1 to 3 billion in the first two years of the civil war. Army defectors were offered $50,000 per family. According to the Stockholm Institute for International Peace Studies, Qatar supplied more weapons to Syria than any other country. Between April 2012 and March 2013, there were 70 flights of aircraft transporting weapons.  

In Qatar, a training camp was set up, where the Qatari and the US military trained about 1,200 fighters a year at three-week courses. Qatar supports both moderate rebels and those who are known as the “Army of Conquest”, which includes groups that are associated with Al-Qaeda.  

Over time, the Gulf States, frightened by the rapid advance of ISIL in Iraq and the seizure of large territories, began to curtail the flow of funding for extremist groups. The Supreme Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdallah Al ash-Sheikh, stated that “the ideas of extremism, radicalism and terrorism . . . have nothing to do with Islam and (their proponents) are the enemy number one of Islam”. He specifically mentioned ISIL and Al-Qaeda.  

Meanwhile, differences were accumulating between regional sponsors of the armed Syrian opposition. Qatar’s ambitions clashed with Saudi Arabia’s desire to play the key role in the region. The Saudis started to support the “moderate” Islamists and the Free Syrian Army before the Qatars. The Qatars responded with funding Jabhat al-Nusra. Al Jazeera TV channel criticized the Saudi ruling family. It led to a crisis in March 2014, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Doha.  

Qatari Emir Tamim stated in September 2014 that “Qatar has never supported and will never support terrorist organizations”. But his assistance to other organizations with weapons and equipment led to the arming of ISIL.  

American officials have long shut their eyes to the prosperous business of smuggling oil into Turkey. But the constant flow of fighters, including foreign extremists, through the Turkish long and easily penetrable border with Syria is well documented. Western journalists have repeatedly reported that hundreds of people illegally cross the border. They have met foreign fighters, including Europeans, who fought in Syria, who stated that they had come there through Turkey.  

Christopher Harmer, a senior naval analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, told the BBC that IS fighters were allowed to use Turkey “at a minimum as a free movement zone”, but Ankara provided more direct “logistical support” to al-Nusra rebels at times during the civil war.  

During the decade before 2011, relations between Turkey and Syria were friendlier than during any sufficiently long period of history. The Turks remembered that in 1999 Asad’s father Hafez Asad did not allow the Kurdish leader Abdullah
Ocalan to stay in Syria. Relations between the two countries became warmer. Many border problems were solved. But the civil war broke out, and a complete disengagement occurred. In the Turkish territory, defectors from the Syrian army were trained; the headquarters of the Free Syrian Army, which was under the supervision of Turkish intelligence, was also there. Since October 2011, Turkey began to set up training camps on its territory and, together with Saudi Arabia and Qatar, provided the rebels with weapons and other military equipment.

British analyst Patrick Cockburn, referring to a special operations officer in the Middle East, reports that ISIL fighters were happy when the anti-Asad opposition received weapons, because ISIL could always obtain them. Cockburn concludes that it was the US, the EU and their regional allies that created the conditions for the rise of ISIL.

It is very difficult to logically explain the Turkish policy. Official Turkey and its leader R. Erdogan should have been interested in the stability of the autocratic regime in Syria: it ensured peace in the country and on the borders with Turkey, did not allow the Syrian Kurds to come to the aid of the Turkish Kurds through the nearly 400-kilometer poorly protected border and did not send terrorists to Turkey, as well as to other countries.

The most advantageous position for Erdogan would have been to stay above the fray, i.e. not to interfere in Syria’s internal affairs. But the neo-Ottoman illusions, formed initially by the Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister Akhmet Davutoglu, with the hope of a “protectorate” over Syria, and the formal ideological proximity to Islamist groups, as well as hopes for American support for such policies – all this pushed Turkey into other direction. The mantra “Bashar must go”, and that all means were good for this, for a long time became the credo of Turkish policy for Syria.

In May 2015, there was a public scandal: the Cumhuriyet newspaper published a photo report on how Turkish intelligence sent weapons to Syrian Islamists. The editor-in-chief and more than 30 people who participated in the investigation were accused of violating anti-terrorism laws, revealing “state secrets”, attempting to overthrow the government and espionage.

Such accusations against the Turkish authorities appeared more than once. When the siege of Kobani was in progress, Turkey allegedly allowed ISIL fighters to attack the Kurds from the Turkish territory, and their snipers – to shoot from there at the Kurds. There were allegations that trucks with people in Turkish military uniforms carried arms to ISIL, and that during the fighting with the Kurds Turkish ambulances transported wounded terrorists to Turkish territory.

Ankara’s relations with the Kurds are a separate, extensive topic. In March 2013, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and Ankara announced a truce, and the PKK undertook to withdraw armed detachments to northern Iraq. Violations of the truce by both sides were quite frequent. In 2014, Erdogan was elected president. Expecting to abolish the constitution of Turkey and make it a presidential republic, he began to flirt with extreme nationalists, who had anti-Kurdish attitudes. Ankara strengthened ties with Barzani in northern Iraq and began buying Kurdish oil. Barzani forbade to assist the Turkish Kurds from his territory.
The development of events in Syria led to the creation of an almost autonomous Syrian Kurdistan, linked to the PKK, in the north-eastern part of the country. The People’s Protection Units (YPG) entered the city of Kobani on the very border with Turkey. ISIL units were advancing against Kobani. They were bombed by the Americans.\footnote{77}

The relations between the US, Turkey, the Kurds and the jihadists became a puzzle. The Turks fought against “their” Kurds led by the PKK, and simultaneously against the jihadists of ISIL, who were assisted through the territory of Turkey, where ISIL also sold its contraband oil. The Americans, who had declared the PKK a “terrorist organization” in 1997, openly assisted (with arms supplies and special forces) its Syrian affiliate – YPG, which became a de facto ally of Damascus, and bombarded ISIL positions. ISIL fought against the Kurds, the Turks, the Americans, the “pro-American” government in Baghdad and the “anti-American” government in Damascus. Over time, it was getting increasingly tangled up.

Hard-pressed by the United States and other countries, Ankara allowed to assist the Kurds in Kobani. Peshmerga units of Barzani’s armed forces and Free Syrian Army fighters came to the aid. In January 2015, ISIL units were repelled from Kobani. But the ceasefire between the PKK and Ankara ended, and the fighting between the rebelling Kurds and the Turkish army resumed in Kurdish areas of Turkey. In 1997, the United States had accused the PKK of being terrorists, but now it realized that the Syrian branch of the PKK was an effective force against ISIL.\footnote{78}

Patrick Cockburn wrote that there was “strong evidence for a degree of collaboration” between the Turkish intelligence services and ISIS, although “the exact nature of the relationship . . . remains cloudy”.\footnote{79} More than once, Western researchers and Egyptian officials supported the allegation that Turkey extensively cooperated with ISIL. Turkish airstrikes against Kurds were allegedly coordinated with ISIL. Injured militants were treated in Turkish hospitals.

The Turks were accused of turning their territory into the “Gateway to Jihad”.\footnote{80} Turkish border guards for small bribes let anyone go to Syria. Information of this kind was also provided by the American television company Sky News, the UK’s Guardian, and the Internet site Al-Monitor, and a group of researchers from Columbia University, which included Americans, Europeans and Turks.

After the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, the US administration demanded that Turkey close the borders for ISIL fighters. A senior US official told the Wall Street Journal: “The rules of the game have changed. That’s enough. It is necessary to seal the border”.\footnote{81}

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev made his assessment of the situation: “Turkish actions de facto protect the Islamic State (i.e. ISIL/ISIS). We are not surprised when we receive information about the direct financial interests of some Turkish officials concerning the supply of petroleum products from oil refineries that are controlled by ISIL.”\footnote{82} Antiquities looted in Syria were also sold by contraband through Turkey.

Turkish opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu said: “It is unfair that armed groups are trained on the Turkish soil. You bring foreign fighters to Turkey, put
money in their pockets, rifles in their hands, and you ask them to kill Syrian Muslims.\textsuperscript{83} On 16 February 2016, Kilicdaroglu again accused the Turkish government of sending weapons to groups of jihadists in Syria and setting up a camp for their training in Turkey itself.\textsuperscript{84}

In July 2016, a document leaked from the German Ministry of Internal Affairs. It stated that Turkey was helping terrorist Islamist groups throughout the Middle East.\textsuperscript{85} The US special forces captured documents that testified to the direct links of Turkish officials with the highest members of ISIL leadership.\textsuperscript{86}

Turkey’s interests in Syria were complex. The tomb of Suleiman Shah (1178–1236), the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire, Osman I (1258–1326), was located in Syria on the bank of the Euphrates and was under the protection of Turkish troops. The building and the Turkish military and civil servants were in danger. On the evening of 21 February 2015, Turkish tanks and infantry entered the territory of Syria near Kobani for the evacuation of Turkish soldiers and the tomb. The operation was coordinated with the Syrian Kurds.

It can be said with certainty that King Abdullah II of Jordan was aware of the danger of Islamist extremism. But his poor kingdom depended on the financial assistance of the rich countries of the Persian Gulf and the political patronage of the United States. Therefore, Jordan let camps for the training of fighters (supposedly non-Islamic) operate in Jordan. Through the kingdom, assistance was provided to the opposition in southern Syria. For instance, in the summer of 2013, large quantities of arms and ammunition, in particular, dozens of modern tanks, were transported through Jordan.\textsuperscript{87}

In the 2000s, Syria and Iran were moving towards closer cooperation. This was prompted by the presence of US troops in Iraq. President Asad was the first foreign head of state to visit Iran after President Ahmadinejad assumed the office in 2005. Both countries had a similar position on Iraq, on Palestinian-Israeli relations, on the situation in Lebanon. Neither Syria nor Iran were interested in the emergence of a hostile pro-American government in Baghdad. They also opposed the establishment of a de facto independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq. During these years, there expanded the cooperation between Damascus and Tehran in the defence sphere.\textsuperscript{88}

Naturally, such policy irritated Washington and Tel Aviv. Perhaps that is why the United States immediately supported anti-government forces in Syria, no matter their ideology.

On the eve of the Syrian crisis, relations between Iran and Syria were developing within the framework of cooperation between close, perhaps even strategic, allies. There were also differences, which consisted in the desire of Syria to maintain friendly relations with the Arab Sunni regimes in the hope of receiving substantial financial assistance. But since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the alignment of sympathies and antipathies has become clear. Iran provided logistical, technical, financial support to the Syrian government, participated in the training of the Syrian army.\textsuperscript{89} Syria allegedly received supplies of Iranian weapons.
Supporting Syria was in line with Iran’s strategic interests. But there are no concrete and proven figures.

Iranian intelligence agencies closely cooperated with their Syrian counterparts. Iran provided the Syrians with modern equipment to monitor telephone conversations and social networks. Iran’s technology was one of the most advanced in the world.

Some sources claimed that by the end of 2013 Iran already had up to 10,000 civilian and military personnel, including combat units, in Syria. The reported figures still range from hundreds to 10,000 servicemen.

The commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qasem Soleimani allegedly not only developed the military strategy of the Syrian government, but also helped in the reorganization of the regime’s armed forces and in the training of the pro-government militia. The Syrian opposition claimed that Iran was allegedly providing enormous financial assistance. Although the figures were simply unrealistic, Iran did supply oil, fuel and food to Syria. Some of the assistance was sent directly through Iraq, where the Shiite government, which was friendly to Iran and Syria, allowed unimpeded Iranian flights despite Washington’s displeasure.

It was believed that it was due to the involvement of Iran and Hezbollah in the civil war that the government army made significant advances in the summer of 2013.

According to unconfirmed reports, the IRGC lost more than 1,100 people in Syria in 2013, 360 of them were Iranian officers, and the rest were mercenaries, mostly from Afghanistan, and some from Pakistan, who served for money and in the hope of obtaining Iranian citizenship. In 2013, several Iranian generals were killed in the fighting. In Syria, there allegedly fought the Iranian paramilitary militia Basij and Shiite militias from Iraq. Some reports put their numbers in “thousands”. The alleged figure for Iranian losses in 2015 is 121 IRGC soldiers, but some other sources provide different figures.

In April 2014, Iranian deputy foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdolahian said, “We do not see President Bashar Asad staying in power indefinitely but neither do we want “extremist forces” to replace him”. Perhaps the phrase pinpointed Iran’s policy in Syria: Tehran has not bet on Asad personally. But in conversations with the present author, Iranians repeatedly said that at the moment only Asad guaranteed stability in the territories controlled by the regime, and a transition period could not begin with his removal from power.

There was coordination between Moscow and Tehran, especially at the beginning of the first half of 2015, when the regime was in a critical situation.

The attitude of the Israeli government to the civil war in Syria boiled down to the main question: what was beneficial for the security of Israel? The victory of jihadists would be dangerous: not just separate detachments, but an army of rabid fanatical enemies of Israel would appear on the armistice line in the Golan Heights. Asad’s victory? It would seem that over the decades of the rule of the Asads – father and son – there have not been any incidents on the armistice line. But the traditional anti-Israel rhetoric of the Baathists, close relations with Iran,
the alliance with Hezbollah, which had actually defeated the Israeli army during the brief war in Lebanon in 2006 – due to this no thoughts were permissible of Asad’s possible victory or strengthening of the regime.

This logic has determined the interest of the Israeli leadership in the continuation of the civil war in Syria: let the opponents of Israel exterminate each other. An antipathy to the Baathists has prevailed. There have been reports about deliveries of Israeli weapons to the opposition and about treatment of FSA fighters in Israeli hospitals. In September 2014, the Israelis shot down a Syrian SU-24 bomber in the Israeli-controlled airspace over the Golan Heights.66

Israeli aviation often struck Hezbollah units – Asad’s allies, and, simultaneously, Syrian military positions in coordination with the jihadists, but never – the jihadists themselves. The Russian Foreign Ministry said that the unprovoked Israeli actions against Syria “grossly violate the UN Charter and are “unacceptable”, whatever the justifications”.

So what is next? What is the future of Israel’s neighbours – Syria and Iraq? Expressing the opinion of a significant part of the ruling elite, former Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon said at a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club in Moscow on 27 February 2017, “Syria and Iraq are artificial state entities; in their place there will be Syrian Alawistan, Syrian Kurdistan, a couple of Sunnistans, in Iraq – Kurdistan, Shiastan, etc”.

It did not get further than declarations: the relations between Russia and Israel remained stable. In May 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Moscow. One of the aims of his visit was to convince the Russian leadership not to supply Syria with S-300 air-defence missile systems and other missile systems.

In a number of EU countries, in a two or three years after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, there began discussions about whether the Europeans support the “right” side in the Syrian conflict and what to do with the hundreds of jihadists who went to Syria from the Old World.

In Syria, the terrorist movement was the most structured and organized, while the EU was home to 19 million Muslims. At the same time, a number of Western analysts claimed that Middle Eastern secular nationalist governments, which traditionally fought Islamists, were more convenient for Europe than power in the hands of jihadists, a priori hostile to Western culture and traditions.

Gradually, the Europeans began to understand that, given the close connection of radicals in the Middle East with the “euro division” of Al-Qaeda (“Qa’idat al-Jihad fi Urupa”), it was possible to set some Muslim youth against the West.

In conversations with the present author, in 2014 British political scientists frankly said that the West had made three mistakes in Syria. First: Bashar Asad had turned out to be not a bewildered intellectual, but a strong leader. Second: the regime had retained the loyalty of the army and security agencies, there had been no mass defections. Third, the regime had retained a social base not only among the Alawites and Christians, but also among a significant part of the Sunnis. Unfortunately, the intellectual flairs of “highbrow” researchers have not changed the political course of Western countries. After all, the supreme task consisted not only in overthrowing the Baathist regime (“what will happen, we will figure that
out later”), but in defeating Russia and Iran. Western governments were gripped by the sleep of reason.

When countries of the Persian Gulf rethought their role in the Syrian events, it partially affected the political climate in the region. It was symptomatic that at the Arab League summit in Kuwait City in March 2014, Saudi Arabia and its regional partners listened to the voice of Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan and abandoned the idea of giving Syria’s seat in the League to Syria’s opposition National Coalition. Russia was invited to the summit for the first time since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011. This constituted foundation for awareness of destructive consequences of the growing chaos for all Arabs.

The Americans, too, were forced to adjust their course. At least, to admit publicly that Syrian terrorists were a serious force and, finally, to begin to talk about the need for collective efforts in the fight against jihadism. The United States and NATO countries at one moment announced supplies of arms and humanitarian aid to the opposition, at the next – ceased military assistance.

What was there for Russia to do?

When the Syrian crisis was already in full swing, in January 2012, the international Valdai Discussion Club met in Sochi to discuss the Middle East situation. It was then, assessing the aims of Russian policy in Syria, the present author formulated the following ideas: “1. First of all, it is necessary to stop the bloodshed. 2. The Syrians themselves should solve the Syrian conflict by political means, without resorting to violence. 3. Foreign interference in Syrian affairs should not be allowed”. This position was supported by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, who was present at the meeting. If one looks at the Russian proposals on Syria during the first two years of the Syrian civil war, then – in different versions, shades, and order – they narrowed down to precisely these three points. The author does not stand for the originality of the approach, for having been “smarter” than others, or for his considerations having become the foundation for Russia’s foreign policy. The approach was dictated by the whole logic of Russian diplomacy, and not only in the Near and Middle East.

Over time, the accents changed. The demands to preserve the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria and to observe rights of national and confessional minorities were added to the triad.

The point that changed fundamentally was the attitude to external intervention. Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militias and IRGC soldiers fought in Syria on the side of the regime in response to the involvement of foreign jihadists. Finally, at the request of the Syrian government, Russia’s aerospace forces began to strike at the most odious terrorist groups. Why and how it happened the author will try to explain in this and the next chapter.

Russia supported the Asad regime, while simultaneously calling for an end to violence and intra-Syrian negotiations. Why did not Russia stay away? Moscow posed the question directly: what would be the alternative to the Baathist regime? Only extreme Islamists or a complete chaos. But this is what Russia’s partners in
The West did not want to understand. The logic of their behaviour was limited to this: B. Asad had to leave, and we would go from there. They plunged into a world of illusions, which delayed and aggravated the Syrian tragedy.

The present book outlines Russia’s diplomatic struggle to achieve a political settlement in Syria during the first years of the civil war on the basis of the brilliant work *On the Right Side of History*, written by diplomat and researcher M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva.98 Having personally participated in the work of Russian diplomacy and carefully studied documents, she accurately determines Russian positions in the Security Council, Human Rights Council, UN, other bodies or agencies, and describes Russian efforts to reach agreement with the US and to organize an inter-Syrian dialogue.

The author does not always agree with the tone of the young researcher. The reader still feels the remaining heat of diplomatic encounters and the outrage of youth at the double standards of Western partners. But her thoughts and the presentation of the material reflected the mood of the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Russian leadership, which adds value to the study.

The present author is guided by his long – more than half a century long – personal experience in studying international politics. How can we not remember the triple aggression of the United Kingdom, France and Israel against Egypt in 1956, when the democratic governments of the UK and France in collusion with Israel began Operation Musketeer under the pretext that military actions in the Suez Canal zone hampered its work. Or the Gulf of Tonkin incident of 1964, when warships of a mighty naval power – the United States – were allegedly attacked by Vietnamese torpedo boats, which became the pretext for the many years of bombing of Vietnam. Or the bombing of Serbia in 1999. Just now, in one of the previous chapters, the author mentioned how US Secretary of State Colin Powell waved a test tube allegedly filled with anthrax at the Security Council, claiming that Iraq produced weapons of mass destruction. Thus it is hardly worth it to perceive certain features of the behaviour or statements of Western diplomats with surprise. However, citing M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, the author also preserves the emotional colouring of her text.

And a couple more remarks. In a number of cases, Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva accepts at face value the position of the United States and other Western powers on applying Article VII of the UN Charter to Syria. She believes that they really wanted to get the legal approval of the Security Council for their participation in the military operations in Syria. But, rather, this position had a double bottom. Of course, on the one hand, the West was not averse to freeing its hands for issuing ultimatums to Damascus, but, on the other hand, neither the US nor its allies really wanted to interfere directly in the Syrian civil war. They could have done this, as they had done in Serbia or Iraq, without a decision of the Security Council. The Russian-Chinese veto in the UN Security Council made it possible to avoid a direct intervention, but, at the same time, to denigrate the “supporters of the bloody regime” and to justify themselves to their local clients, who were conducting their policy in the hope of a US military intervention in Syria.
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Sometimes the young researcher is fond of “conspiracy theory”, believing that almost all processes in the region have been directed by the West. However, this her opinion is shared by many in Moscow.

Nonetheless, these remarks do not reduce the high evaluation of the book by M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, which formed the basis of the second part of this chapter.

 Attempts to organize the process of political settlement

Russia repeatedly proposed to convene an international conference on Syria. The task was to push the parties to a truce and search for a political solution.

The US would prefer to adopt a plan to change the existing regime without consulting Damascus. Such a mechanism for changing power seemed like a repetition of the Libyan events.

Russia insisted that the Syrians should decide the future of Syria, not forgetting to mention the need for political reforms. On 18 June 2012, Russia even managed to achieve a formal consensus on Syria at the G8 summit in Los Cabos (Mexico). They recognized that the Syrian people should be able to determine their own future independently, and the transition to a democratic, pluralistic political system should be carried out by the Syrians themselves within the framework of sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.99

The conference was held in Geneva in late June 2012. It was attended by the delegations of Russia, the United States, China, Britain, France, Turkey, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait and the European Union. Moscow suggested to invite Iran and Saudi Arabia, but the candidature of Iran did not suit the United States. Therefore, there were no representatives of these two states in attendance.

On 30 June 2012, the conference adopted a document that implied “international support for the efforts of the Syrians themselves to overcome the crisis”. It was planned to create a transitional government with broad powers. The communiqué stressed that the external players should use their influence on the Syrian parties to bring them to the negotiating table. All parties to the conflict had to stop armed violence and take humanitarian measures. The communiqué did not have a word about Article VII of the UN Charter, preconditions for the start of a negotiation process, or the resignation of President B. Asad.

“The international community managed to develop the most important document, aimed at becoming the foundation of the political process, as well as to agree on a format for cooperation on the Syrian settlement”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva.100

In fact, the United States and other countries immediately began to interpret the Geneva document in their own way: as if the task was simply to select people to replace B. Asad and his entourage. Western countries believed that it was necessary “to increase pressure on Asad”. Washington began to pick certain provisions from the communiqué, which corresponded to its interests. The US advised the
opposition to actively select figures that could replace B. Asad. The formulation that the future of Syria should be decided by the Syrians themselves at the negotiating table was cast aside.

The Syrian government outlined its own version of the tasks ahead: the creation of a mechanism for monitoring the ceasefire, parameters of the political transition, development of the National Charter, formation of an expanded government involving all segments of the Syrian society, development of a new Constitution and the holding of elections. It is possible that a truly free election at that time would have led to the preservation of the Baathists in power. Examples of this have taken place in Angola and Mozambique despite the country differences.

The task was to bring the Syrians themselves to the negotiating table. However, it took many months for the US to “persuade” the Syrian opposition (or, rather, prepare suitable figures) to begin the dialogue with the government.

It should be noted that already in 2012 the situation in the camp of the opposition was rapidly changing. Jihadist extremists were gaining strength. They rejected not only negotiations with the Syrian government, but in general all negotiations, any means of ending the conflict, except for military, and any norms of behaviour offered by the West.

Western countries counted on the Free Syrian Army, which was close to the National Coalition. However, by the middle of 2014, the effectiveness of the FSA had raised more and more doubts.

Then the West recognized “moderate” Islamist groups, in particular the Islamic Front sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which had “signed” the “code of conduct” acceptable to the Western powers, as opposition forces. The task was to unite “moderate” Islamist groups with pro-Western secular politicians under the roof of the National Coalition.

Washington, given the differences between the various opposition groups, was not ready to begin a massive supply of weapons to Syrian rebels. The CIA channelled some equipment, but it did not get to the level of full-scale military assistance. The weapons that still were sent to the opposition sooner or later turned out in the hands of jihadists.

Paris actively interfered in Syrian events. French Foreign Minister L. Fabius admitted on 21 August 2014 in an interview with the Le Monde newspaper that Paris supplied rebels with weapons “with the knowledge of the European Union and the United States”. Obviously, the experience of helping Libyan rebels, who the French later fought in Mali, did not do them much good.

Poison gases

“With an enviable ability to predict the future, leading Western countries were ‘preparing’ the public for the use of ‘chemicals’ in the course of the Syrian crisis”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva. “Arguments were built around the thesis that if the authorities felt that they were cornered and losing the war, they would use chemical weapons locally”.
On 20 August 2012 US President Barack Obama announced the “red line” on Syria, crossing which would force the West to use force. It concerned the possible use of poisonous substances. Naturally, it was presupposed in advance that it would be Damascus that would use chemical weapons. The US President passed his position as the opinion of the “international community”. He was supported by British Prime Minister D. Cameron and French President F. Hollande.

Perhaps Western leaders really feared the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Saddam Hussein had done this in a war against the Kurds. In August 2012, it seemed to them that the regime was breathing its last and would be ready to commit the crime for own salvation. But the Western-backed opposition and its regional sponsors had been waiting and just could not wait for a NATO intervention in the civil war, so that the path to power would be paved by bombs like in Libya. Obama’s statement about the “red line” sounded as a provocative hint of how to “help the West” to take military action.

On 19 March 2013, poisonous substances were actually used in the village of Khan al-Assal (Aleppo province). But how? By whom?

On 20 March, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem sent a letter to the UN Secretary General asking him to organize an independent, impartial investigation into the incident. Ban Ki-moon decided to send experts from the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to Syria. However, just 24 hours later, once again doing the West’s bidding, he unexpectedly announced the need to investigate two more cases of chemical weapons use that had taken place a few months earlier, just as France and the UK, which had previously been silent about these cases, asked of him. Based on their request, the UN demanded unrestricted admission of experts anywhere in Syria. The Iraqi precedent, where the right had been sought after to search for chemical weapons laboratories anywhere – even under Saddam Hussein’s bed – was repeated. The investigation in Khan al-Assal was practically rolled up.

On 21 June 2013 Syrian rebels captured Khan al-Assal for several days and killed witnesses of the chemical attack and local doctors. After the liberation of the village, Russian experts worked there and proved that a hand-crafted sarin of poor quality and a self-made shell were used.

On 21 August 2013 – the day of the arrival of UN experts on chemical weapons in Syria, it was used again – now in a suburb of Damascus (East Ghouta). The media and Western leaders immediately accused the Syrian authorities of the crime, although it turned out that the video of the chemical attack had been published on the Internet 19 hours before it took place.

An analysis of video materials by experts from various organizations found a lot of fakes. The same “dead” child appeared in videos from various localities and then turned out to be alive in the next video. “Killed” children began to breathe and move. Some people placed the “dead” on the floor. Most independent experts arrived at the conclusion that the videos were staged and made before the chemical attack. “Residents of Ghouta” subsequently put photos of the dead on
Facebook. But no one has ever recognized one’s relatives, acquaintances or even locals. A professional investigation was necessary.

However, on 26 August, US Secretary of State John Kerry stated that it had been the regime of B. Asad that had committed “the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians, the killing of women and children and innocent bystanders”. He did not cite any confirmed facts and referred to the opinion of Doctors Without Borders, which, however, refused to support him.

Washington presented its own “irrefutable evidence of B. Asad’s involvement” in the use of poison gases. This was stated on four pages of text, which had such phrases as “the United States Government assesses with high confidence” or “we assess”. US senators asked for a clarification, but did not receive it. It is important to note that American researcher C. Phillips in his book “The Battle for Syria” refrains from categorically accusing the regime of using poisonous substances.

Information warfare in electronic and print media was intensifying. B. Obama spoke about the “change of strategy” for Syria. Western leaders said that the “red line” had been crossed and a response could not be delayed. US aircraft carriers were approaching Syria. In short, bombing was about to begin.

Special representative for Syria L. Brahimi warned against the attack, believing that it would benefit terrorists. Nobody paid attention to him.

If you follow the logic of the information war, it would seem that the head of Syria is either a madman or an idiot. Why would Damascus allegedly use poison gases at the very moment when a group of experts on chemical weapons arrived in the country? Why cross the notorious “red line” when the regime was by no means cornered, and the government troops and their allies enjoyed some success in the course of the civil war? Why condemn oneself to an inevitable defeat?

But it was the National Coalition and its regional patrons that were interested in an immediate bombing campaign to clear the way to Damascus. Suddenly there became known a statement of an expert who could not be suspected of sympathizing with Russia or the regime of B. Asad, namely, a member of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry for Syria Carla del Ponte, who in May 2013 said bluntly: it was the Syrian rebels who first used chemical weapons. Under the pressure of Western countries, the head of the Commission, Paolo Pinheiro, dissociated himself from the statement of Carla del Ponte. He withdrew the data she had voiced from the draft of the report prepared by the Commission on the situation in Syria.

“The political and information situation was similar to the one that preceded the US invasion of Iraq”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva.

A fraudulent pretext, a provocation, hysteric of the media and Western human rights NGOs, which indiscriminately put the blame on one of the parties, disinterest in an honest and objective investigation. At the same time, there was the conviction that there should be a military “response”. . . . Washington was preparing for a bombing campaign, but most Americans opposed the military action. On behalf of more than two dozen former US
The Syrian tragedy

high-ranking military intelligence officers, a letter was sent to Obama stating that Asad had not used chemical weapons in Syria. It had been a provocation by rebels. In their opinion, CIA Director John Brennan was perpetrating an “Iraq-War-type fraud” on the Congress, the media, the world community and the head of state.\textsuperscript{117}

Who did want an American intervention? Senator McCain.\textsuperscript{118} The years he spent in captivity in Vietnam apparently influenced his psyche and made him a convinced enemy of the Chinese, Vietnamese, Communists, Russians and in general anyone who did not work side by side with the United States. Strangely enough, the most “hawkish” position was held by the “socialist” French president,\textsuperscript{119} although France had become entangled in Libya, then in Mali, then in Algeria. The local rebel leaders were simply at a loss: why, after decades of demonstration of muscles, did the Americans not interfere in Syria?

The United States and its allies became victims of their own propaganda campaign. They did not want to interfere directly in the Syrian civil war, but were afraid of losing face.\textsuperscript{120} In late August 2013, the British Parliament adopted a resolution that rejected the use of force against Syria.\textsuperscript{121}

At this point, Russian President Vladimir Putin, in agreement with B. Asad, threw a lifebuoy to the US president, suggesting that all Syrian chemical weapons should be destroyed.

It was clear that this option suited the US. To an even greater degree, it suited Israel. Syria acquired chemical weapons in response to the development of nuclear weapons by Israel.

On 12 September 2013, the Syrians handed over to the UN Secretariat the presidential decree on Syria’s consent to accede to the Convention on the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, as well as on its readiness to implement it immediately.

Just two days later, on 14 September, a Russian-American framework agreement was reached on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons.\textsuperscript{122}

The Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) established a special procedure for the rapid elimination of Syrian chemical weapons and verification of this process. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2118 (September 2013) in support of this decision.

The operation for the removal of chemicals from Syria was completed on 23 June 2014. In total, about 1,200 tons of components and precursors (substances that can be used for the production of chemical weapons, including 20 tons of the only ready-to-use chemical-warfare agent – mustard gas) were removed. About 120 tons of isopropanol were destroyed by the Syrians in the storage areas in coordination with the OPCW.

“The achievement of the agreements on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons has become a major diplomatic victory for Russia”, writes Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva. “They not only allowed staving off the threat of military strikes from Syria. For the first time in many years of US dominance in international politics, the need to look for compromises on complex international subjects and
work collectively on diplomatic solutions prevailed over the logic of pressure and unilateral intervention”. 123

However, the crisis associated with Crimea and Ukraine allowed the US to stop for a while any cooperation with Russia. This will be discussed later on.

An attempt of intra-Syrian dialogue: Geneva II

Geneva II is what they call the International Conference on Syria, which gave rise to the inter-Syrian negotiations. It took a year and a half since the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012 to launch the political process.

The main factor behind the delay was that it was difficult to determine who would represent the opposition. To implement any agreements, a delegation representing a wide range of opposition political forces in Syria would be needed. On 7 May 2013, Russia and the United States (Lavrov and Kerry) agreed on measures to prepare an inter-Syrian conference. 124 It implied a sort of “task-sharing”. Moscow was to persuade Damascus to send a representative delegation for talks, and the US was to work with the Syrian opposition. 125

It should be noted that at that moment the Islamist irreconcilable opposition had not yet come to the forefront. The opposition consisted of various disparate groups (the majority of which, by the way, turned out to be of Islamist orientation), and these had to be brought into a single delegation. In Syria, there was the loose Free Syrian Army, and in Doha – the National Coalition. Moscow had a winning position because it consulted with all opposition groups, including the National Coalition, while the United States had cut off opportunities for contacts, at least open, with the Syrian government. 126

The National Coalition consisted mainly of emigrants who did not have a social base inside the country. Many rebel groups did not recognized it as their leader. Thus, it could not ensure implementation of the decisions taken, be it a temporary ceasefire, the delivery of humanitarian aid or the organization of the fight against terrorism. 127

At the request of the United States, the conference was postponed six times. The main preliminary demand of the National Coalition was the resignation of B. Asad. Thus, the National Coalition wanted to reconsider the agenda of the conference, which had been agreed upon, at least in words, by the United States and Russia, and to direct it at the “capitulation” of Damascus and establishment of a transitional governing body.

The US proclaimed the “umbrella nature” of the National Coalition, i.e., its position of general leadership of the opposition. But for many groups, especially Syria’s domestic opposition, its leadership was unacceptable. The main points of disagreement included not only the determination of the fate of B. Asad, but also the calls of the National Coalition to bombard Syria in order to resolve the conflict along the lines of the Libyan scenario. In addition, it was known that funding for the National Coalition came entirely from abroad, so it depended on external sponsors. 128
A number of representatives of the domestic opposition forged plans for the political transformation of the regime. However, the Americans did not include any of them in the delegation to the talks, declaring them “puppets of the regime”.129

During the campaign to change the regime in Syria, the West practiced tried and tested methods. Its policy was defined by the thesis “Asad has lost legitimacy”, strengthened by the argument that “the National Coalition is the legitimate representative of the Syrian people”130.

Although the special representative for Syria L. Brahimi advocated for the participation of broad opposition forces in negotiations, and the Syrian parties demanded from the UN Secretary General to provide for their participation in the dialogue, the US formed a team exclusively from representatives of the National Coalition. Indeed, on the eve of the meeting, it split. The so-called “pro-Qatar grouping” left its ranks demonstratively, while the “bloc” of the Syrian National Council under the leadership of George Sabra refused to participate in Geneva II.131

Thus, opposition forces were not fully represented at the conference. All domestic opposition movements – the National Coordination Committee, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, the Popular Front for Change and Liberation, etc, which stood for peaceful political struggle on the condition of receiving sufficiently broad democratic rights in their capacity of official opposition, were excluded from the negotiations.

The conference details was coordinated by representatives of Russia, the United States and the United Nations.

The conference was attended by 39 states and several international organizations. From Moscow’s perspective, it was logical to invite Iran. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon sent an invitation to the Iranians, but then he withdrew it under pressure from Washington.132 This looked indecent, insulted Iran and once again demonstrated the dependency of the UN Secretary General on the will of the United States.

Nevertheless, on 22 January 2014, the conference opened in Montreux, Switzerland. The speeches of the parties were emotional. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem spoke about crimes of terrorists, while the head of the delegation of the National Coalition Ahmad Jarba held the ruling regime responsible for crimes and troubles in Syria. Some Western countries and representatives of the Persian Gulf countries fuelled the intransigence of Syrian participants. Russia advocated constructive steps that would allow the Syrian people to determine their own future themselves. In the opinion of the Russian side, external players were to encourage the Syrians to reach an agreement, to refrain from attempts to predetermine the final agreement and to deter all parties from these and other steps that could disrupt the negotiation process.133

After the opening of the conference in Geneva, inter-Syrian consultations were held in two rounds (25–31 January and 10–15 February 2014). The parties did not reach an agreement.

Naturally, the US blamed the official Damascus for the failure of the negotiations, while Russian diplomacy held responsible the US and its allies.
However, there were a number of positive aspects: certain agreements on humanitarian issues were concluded, so Russia viewed Geneva II as a success of its diplomacy.

At the same time, one should take note once again that this meeting took place before the Ukrainian and Crimean crises and before Islamist Jihadists, who were not capable of any negotiations at all, came to dominate the Syrian opposition.

At the same time, we note once again that this meeting occurred at a time when the Ukrainian and Crimean crises were not flared up, and the Jihadist Islamists, who were not capable of any negotiations at all, were not yet dominating the ranks of the Syrian opposition.

On 3 June 2014, Syria’s presidential elections for the first time in the history were held on an alternative basis. More than 11.5 million Syrians participated in the voting. The turnout allegedly exceeded 73 percent. B. Asad won with 88.7 percent of the vote. Among the election observers were heads of missions of Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, India, Iran, Iraq, Nicaragua, Russia, South Africa and Venezuela. The Iranian representative read a statement on behalf of the observers, claiming that the election was “free, fair, open, transparent”. The Gulf Cooperation Council, the EU and the US declared the elections to be illegal and a farce.

The UN Security Council: four vetoes and a few joint resolutions

The United Nations and its agencies became the field of diplomatic and information war on the Syrian issue. The main difficulty for Russia, as it had been previously for the USSR, was that the US and its allies almost always had a formal majority that supported their course either by conviction or under pressure. This was the case in the General Assembly, in the Human Rights Council and in other bodies. It was only in the Security Council that Russia and China had the right of veto, that is, the right to prevent the adoption of resolutions that would threaten their interests or, in their view, undermine international peace and security and the foundations of the international legal order.

Four times (in 2011–2015) Russia and China vetoed the resolutions proposed by the West that, either in an open or a disguised manner, called for the application of Article VII of the UN Charter on “action with respect to threats to the peace” – naturally, the latter supposedly emanating from the ruling regime – which would give a legal basis for a military intervention in Syria on the side of the opposition. Craftiness or “doublethink” of Western countries was that they only wanted to have freedom of hands in the Syrian crisis, to choose the time and means for a possible military action against B. Asad’s regime, but in fact did not want to interfere in the civil war directly.

The deeper Libya was plunging into chaos and lawlessness before their eyes, which was a direct consequence of a NATO intervention and the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, and the greater was the weight of frenzied fanatics in the Syrian armed opposition, the less desire had the US and its allies to intervene in a new conflict directly. Therefore, Western politicians, also in private conversations with
the author of these lines, expressed satisfaction that Russia and China vetoed their draft resolutions in the Security Council. With what relief did the West receive the Russian-American agreement on Syrian chemical weapons disarmament! The Security Council voted unanimously in support of this initiative. However, every time Russia and China vetoed its resolutions, the West propagandistically demonized Russia, which “supported the bloody dictator” and ignored the demands of the “world community”.

Here are some sample statements by Western diplomats.

Permanent Representative of France to the UN Gérard Araud:

History will judge harshly those countries that have prevented the Council from offering its support to the courageous efforts of the Arab League to implement its plan. In so doing, they have without scruple aligned themselves with a regime slaughters its own people. In so doing, they have judged that their presence in the Middle East now depends on the future of the Al-Assad. That presence and that regime will endure the same fate.\(^\text{136}\)

Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the UN Sir Mark Lyall Grant:

“By exercising their veto today, Russia and China have failed in their responsibilities as permanent members of the Security Council to help resolve the crisis in Syria. . . . They have, for the third time, blocked an attempt by the majority of the Council and supported by most of the international community to try a new approach. The effect of their actions will be to protect a brutal regime”.\(^\text{137}\)

Let us recall that during the debates in the UN Security Council on Libya, the same L. Grant said: “The situation in Libya is clear. A violent, discredited regime that has lost all legitimacy is using weapons of war against civilians . . . . The regime has advertised its determination to continue persecuting and killing those Libyans who want only to take control of their own future”.\(^\text{138}\)

In September 2016, almost five years after Gaddafi’s overthrow, the bipartisan Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament published a report based on interviews with all key British decision-makers, a review of documents and field research in Africa. The report noted that the Libyan war was based on lies, it destroyed the country and spread terrorism widely. The threat to civilians from the Libyan government forces was dramatically overstated. “The Gaddafi regime had retaken towns from the rebels without attacking civilians in early February 2011”\(^\text{139}\). Amnesty International, which investigated the events of June 2011, failed to confirm massive violations of human rights by the forces of the Gaddafi regime. However, it found evidence that rebels in Benghazi had made false statements and fabricated evidence.

The report also confirmed that the terrorists associated with Al-Qaeda participated in the uprising in Benghazi in March 2011.
It is intriguing, what will be the conclusions of a new Foreign Affairs Committee of the British Parliament with regards to the events in Syria, and what will L. Grant say then?

Meanwhile, he spoke on Syria: “It has been 10 months since the Syrian people bravely demanded their universal rights, and 10 months since the Syrian regime responded by violently repressing and killing its own people”.

Former Permanent Representative of the United States to the UN Susan Rice spoke in the same spirit: “Let there be no doubt: this is not about military intervention. This is not about Libya. That is a cheap ruse by those who would rather sell arms to the Syrian regime than stand with the Syrian people”.

It should be reiterated that this rhetoric of the Cold War had been used BEFORE the events in Ukraine and Crimea.

Despite the textual differences, the essence of the resolutions proposed by Western countries, and consequently vetoed by Russia and China, consisted of one-sided accusations of the Syrian government of all sins, keeping silent about the responsibility of the opposition, ultimatums against Damascus and threats of military action on the Libyan scenario.

As noted by M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, the first resolution (October 2011) was developed under the “umbrella” of human rights. However, not only Russia and China, but also Brazil, India, Lebanon and South Africa refused to support this document. On 15 December 2011, Russia proposed to the Security Council to adopt a resolution condemning the violence of “all parties, including the disproportionate use of force by the Syrian authorities”. But the draft resolution also touched upon the “illegal supplies of arms to the armed groups in Syria”. Western countries refused to support this proposal.

The second project (February 2012) called for a military solution, referring to human rights and humanitarian arguments. The accused, naturally, was the Syrian leadership, while the crimes of terrorists were ignored. The resolution provided for “further measures” (i.e., the “use of force”) in case of the failure of Damascus to implement the resolution.

Western diplomats rejected the Russian proposal to include in the resolution a call on the opposition to distance itself from extremists and on the armed groups to end attacks on residential areas. Perhaps, the West hoped that B. Asad’s regime was about to fall. Therefore, they were satisfied with the Russian-Chinese veto.

Just at that time, Russia intensified the search for a peaceful solution. Minister of Foreign Affairs S. Lavrov and Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) M. Fradkov visited Damascus in early February 2012 and met with President B. Asad. The delegation stated that Asad is a supporter of constitutional and electoral reforms. However, according to Lavrov and Fradkov, only Syria itself, without foreign interference, could change the fate of its people. Their statement was ignored by Western partners.

The third project (July 2012) was of “political and human rights” nature. The appeal to Chapter VII of the UN Charter was disguised by the demand to
implement the peace plan of the UN/LAS Joint Special Envoy on Syria Kofi Annan. Damascus was to cease hostilities and was accused in advance of not having done so, while the obligations of the armed opposition were described vaguely. The threat of sanctions addressed exclusively the government. It was understood that if within 10 days the government did not comply with the demands of the resolution, the use of force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter would be authorized automatically. On 19 July, Russia and China vetoed the draft resolution. Pakistan and South Africa also refused to support it.

The fourth veto was applied in May 2014. This time a French draft proposed referring the Syrian dossier to the International Criminal Court. Russia doubted the impartiality of this court. After all, not a single Libyan jihadist, even covered in blood from tip to toe, had not been held accountable. It was almost impossible to prosecute Syrian rebels because they lacked a central command. Syria’s leadership again was in the sight of a gun.

Still, there were many positive moments in the work of the UN. It succeeded in adopting depoliticized decisions on humanitarian issues. During the transfer of humanitarian aid, the Syrian authorities tried to negotiate temporary cease-fires with rebels. The UN Security Council supported such local armistices after Russia’s insistent demands.146

Upon a Russian initiative, the President of the UN Security Council made a statement on the inadmissibility of transactions with oil from the areas controlled by jihadists.

UN Security Council Resolutions 2170 (August 2014), 2178 (September 2014) and 2199 (February 2015) have become a great achievement as depoliticized international cooperation on the anti-terrorist platform and the need for collective response to common threats. The documents recognize the transboundary nature of terrorism and strongly condemn the actions of radical groups in Syria and Iraq. It is important that all states were required to take measures to prevent the escalation of the terrorist threat, including the ban on financing and trading in oil and oil products with ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, ideological aspects (combating incitement to acts motivated by extremism and intolerance), and corresponding steps at the national level. The resolutions encouraged the deepening of international and subregional cooperation between states in the counter-terrorism sphere, including the exchange of information on foreign terrorist fighters. All of these UN Security Council resolutions have been developed at Russia’s instigation or initiative.

Yet for three years Russia’s Western partners were avoiding the discussion – and especially the adoption – of resolutions on the joint struggle against the terrorist threat. When terrorist threats became terrorist acts, sometimes an understanding between Russia and Western partners was achieved. There was no fatal split in the Security Council, although in fact the world was already slipping towards a relapse of the Cold War because of the events in Ukraine and Crimea.

Demonization of Bashar Asad: OHCHR and Western media

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), made up mainly from representatives of Western countries and their allies, acted in their
interests. It was difficult to expect objectivity from it. So it was during the events in Libya, and the same partiality manifested itself in Syria.

The regime of B. Asad was always blamed for everything. Repeatedly, OHCHR adopted resolutions condemning official authorities in Syria even before the investigation of a crime began or the perpetrator was identified. It was disadvantageous for Western countries to draw attention to crimes of the armed opposition. Suffice it to recall the murders in the town of al-Qusayr in June 2013. At that time the Western opponents of Damascus, monarchies of the Persian Gulf and Turkey accused the regime of these crimes. But after a year of investigation it turned out that the murders had been committed by Islamists, and then this topic was no longer of interest to OHCHR and Western media.

Usually, having “incidentally” mentioned the fact that rebels were violating human rights, representatives of the United States and its allies still refused to provide an adequate assessment of the actions of the armed opposition. The crimes included atrocities against civilians, execution of religious figures, expulsion of Christians, Kurds, Yezidis, etc. from their houses, establishment of slave markets, killing of UN humanitarian workers. It was the regime that was always the accused.

From there on it rolled. With reference to the statements of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (the statements were prepared by Western representatives at the UN Secretariat), “deep concern” with “the repressive actions of the Syrian regime” was expressed. OHCHR members, “concerned about the situation”, demanded urgent action to “stop the bloody dictator”. Having “pushed” the necessary resolution through OHCHR and “stamped” it at the UN General Assembly, “Syria’s friends” began to “storm” the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, mass media in Western countries and their allies were instilling in their viewers and readers the idea that “Russia and China alone blocked the resolution that the ‘entire world’ supported, claiming that the ‘entire world’ was in favour, while Russia and China were against it”.

“Representatives of Russia have repeatedly stressed the counterproductiveness and even danger of the way the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights selectively criticizes some states and ignores human rights violations in others”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva.

However, the members of the Council included countries that at that time needed to turn the body into a political “cudgel”, integrating its actions into efforts to isolate individual governments. In the Syrian context, it was not about protecting human rights, but about “human rights support” of specific political goals. No decision of the Office has helped to stop the degradation of the human rights situation in Syria, no resolution has been aimed at supporting inter-Syrian negotiations or unifying the international community on the platform of the necessity to stop the excesses of jihadists. The way OHCHR viewed the Syrian dossier has shown that the Office is turning from a human rights instrument into a tribune for defaming undesirable regimes. Combined with a hysterical campaign in the media, pressure in the Security
Council, unilateral economic sanctions, and supporting rebels with money and weapons, the policy, as the US and its allies believed, could ultimately lead to the desired result – a regime change from outside under a humanitarian and human rights pretext.\(^{147}\)

It is necessary to emphasize that this refers to the events of the beginning of the Syrian conflict. The assessment of Syrian events by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights sometimes changed. In 2014, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein of Jordan became the new head of OHCHR. He did not want to turn a blind eye to the dominance of extremists in the opposition forces in Syria.

“The work of the media of the countries that were aiming at changing the regime in Syria was conducted according to the established scheme”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva. “That is exactly the way reports had been made during the events in Yugoslavia in 1999, in Iraq in 2003, and in Libya in 2011: one-sidedly, aggressively, with a touch of hysteria and sensationalism, and with accusatory bias. The anti-Syrian information campaign most resembled the one conducted by Western and Arab media against Libya”.\(^{148}\)

The logical chain boiled down to the following: “The people want democracy; the bloody regime kills the people who want democracy; it is necessary to help the people to achieve democracy; for this, it is necessary to remove the dictatorial regime; ‘undemocratic’ Russia is hindering the removal of the tyrant by the civilized world community”.\(^{149}\)

Mass media were mobilized to prove that Asad was “illegitimate” and should be removed as soon as possible. Few could afford to express a different point of view, although on 29 April 2014 B. Asad was re-elected president for the first time in an alternative election.

The conflict was being personified; the mantra: “B. Asad must go” was repeated over and over. “This should solve all the problems. Let the ‘illegitimate’ president go, and then it will be ‘business as usual’, bloodshed will end, democracy will triumph”. No one gave a sensible answer to the question of what would be the alternative to Asad. Russia, which opposed the “external” “engineering” of a change in Syria, was put by Western media in the category of states that impeded the “democratic aspirations of the people” and practically blamed for all the Syrian troubles.\(^{150}\) An illusion was created that “the entire world”, “the entire world community” supported the opposition and only “isolated Russia” supported the “bloody dictator”.

The mass media forged an alternative reality or pseudo-reality, in which, at best, some events were ignored, while others were emphasized; fictitious “facts” were “confirmed” by other fakes. In protest against staging reports, some journalists left Al-Jazeera TV channel.

The media managed to turn not only the masses of Arabs, but also many leaders against the regime of B. Asad. However, even the League of Arab States became split. Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan were not ready to support the public defamation campaign against one of the members of the League and let the official Damascus keep a place in the League.\(^{151}\)
Thousands of rebels were referred to as “civilians who were forced to take up arms and defend themselves against the regime”. As for terrorist acts, they were committed by people who “had despaired and did not have other ways to fight the regime”.\(^{152}\)

Then, when the nature of many opposition fighters became clear, Western and Arab media began to divide the rebels into “good” and “bad”. The Free Syrian Army and the Islamic were the “good” ones, while Jabhat al-Nusra (renamed to Fateh al-Sham) and ISIL became the “bad” ones.\(^{153}\)

Western politicians, who participated in shaping the narrative in the media, simultaneously were becoming dependent on it. They were forced to continue the old course, even if the realities demanded a revision.

### Terrorism: “Extremists” and “moderates”

When it came to terrorist acts against the regime, the West would use the argument that people who had “despaired” and had no other means of fighting the regime carried out the attacks. “Double standards were incredible: there were cases when Western members of the UN Security Council agreed to condemn terrorist attacks in Iraq, while refusing to adopt the same statements on Syria, where the victims of such attacks had included women and children”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva.\(^{154}\)

Over time, the US began to “divide” the rebels into “good” and “bad”, “moderates” and “extremists”.

By the end of 2013, it had turned out that the Free Syrian Army had been falling apart and disappearing into the shadows. Its structure consisted of numerous groupings, most of them Islamist. Then the Americans decided to bet on the Islamic Front, assessing it as the most moderate organization of the Islamist orientation.\(^{155}\)

The Islamic Front was established in November 2013, as most experts believe, by Riyadh to strengthen its positions in Syria and weaken the pro-Qatar and pro-Turkish groups.\(^{156}\) The Islamic Front was envisioned as a rival of ISIL. The Islamic Front fought ISIL for control of oil, spheres of influence and foreign aid. Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front shared ideological foundations. The Islamic Front did not conceal that it opposed negotiations with the government.

“In the course of contacts with American counterparts, Russian diplomats repeatedly warned about the harmfulness of the logic of dividing terrorists into ‘bad’ and ‘good’ ones and insisted that the West should not fight Asad, but focus on developing effective measures to stop radicalization of the situation”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva.

It was at the initiative of President Vladimir Putin that the final document of the G8 summit in Lough Erne on 17–18 June 2013 contained a wording that called on the Syrian government and the opposition to unite in the fight against terrorists. Owing to Russian diplomatic efforts, over time, it was
possible to include passages condemning terrorism in UN Security Council resolutions and resolutions of other UN bodies, and, at a later stage, to adopt “strong” UN Security Council resolutions on combating terrorism. 157

The mass executions, also of religious leaders, carried out by jihadists provoked fierce opposition of radicals and ethnic and confessional minorities, as well as the outflow of representatives of national and religious communities from Syria. The country had historically been polyethnic and multi-confessional and had a unique model of mutually respectful coexistence of different religious communities, but now the situation was becoming dramatic.

Prior to the tragic events, Syria could boast of an ethically coloured panorama and religious diversity. The Orthodox Christians, Yakovites, Armenians, Gregorians, Maronites, Nestorians, Melikites, Syriacs, Armenian Catholics, Chaldeans, Druze, Jews, Yezidis and others live in the country peacefully and harmoniously. As a result of acquiescence toward these extremist forces, which external actors tried to use in the struggle against the regime of B. Asad, this way of life was being destroyed. 158

At the same time, Russian and American diplomats, and personally Lavrov and Kerry, were negotiating for hours and days to find agreement on the question: which of the armed opposition groups could still be regarded as moderate. After many months of discussions, Russia agreed not to consider Ahrar al-Sham a terrorist organization.

The cancerous tumour and its metastases

The Syrian tragedy meant hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded, millions of internally displaced persons and millions of refugees in neighbouring countries. The figures are inaccurate, but it is estimated that about three million Syrians came to Turkey (although it is not clear whether this figure includes those hundreds of thousands, almost a million, of migrants that illegally migrated further on to Europe). About 1.5 million arrived to Jordan, up to 1.4 million – to Lebanon. 159 Syria is destroyed and ruined. Reconstruction (if peace ensues!) will take many years and hundreds of billions of dollars.

Syrian refugees have become an unbearable burden for all neighbours, especially for Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. When a critical mass of refugees was reached in Turkey in 2015, a human wave overflowed through Greek islands in the Aegean Sea and rushed to Europe. The Turkish government did not try to stop this wave, perhaps, deliberately “pushed” refugees towards Europe, and then started negotiations with the EU on the conditions Turkey wanted to be met in exchange for preventing illegal migration. The crisis with illegal immigrants, which was also fuelled by a flow of immigrants from Africa, arriving via the Mediterranean Sea, mainly through Libya, aggravated relations within the EU. Some of its members refused to accept refugees. Only Germany opened the doors for them, although it was a blow to the prestige of Chancellor Angela Merkel. By mid-2016, Germany had received about one million refugees, most of them Syrians. Terrorists from
ISIL and other organizations easily mingled with thousands of migrants to create ready for action sleeper cells throughout Western Europe.

The cancerous tumour of extremism and terrorism developed extraordinarily rapidly in Iraq and Syria and metastasized in a dozen countries.

In the Near and Middle East and in Africa, the influence of Al-Qaeda, ISIL, Taliban and other extremists expanded explosively. After the overthrow of strong secular governments in a number of countries, there were no government structures left that were really capable of becoming an obstacle on the path of jihadists. Only the restoration in power of the military in Egypt caused moderate optimism. The events in Libya contributed to the spread of extremism, rampant terrorism, a sharp increase in the turnover of arms and the transit of drugs and migrants in the Sahara-Sahel region. A new impetus was given to such groups as Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, Somalia’s al-Shabab. ISIL branches successfully competed with Taliban in Afghanistan, appeared in Southeast Asia and Central Asian republics, in Russia’s North Caucasus.

The Middle East, first of all Iraq and Syria, in 2015 turned into a military, ideological and financial magnet, attracting jihadists from all over the world – French, Belgians, British, Americans, Tunisians, Libyans, Saudis, as well as Russians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Uighurs. C. Philips provides the figure of 30,000 foreign jihadist militants in Syria, which roughly coincides with Russian estimates.

Syria’s Raqqa was proclaimed the capital of the “caliphate”, whose lands the jihadists were planning to “expand”, but the future capital was to become Mecca. The danger was already looming for the ruling clan of Saudi Arabia.

The United States, which just a year ago had planned to bomb Asad, in September 2014 put together an international coalition to strike at ISIL positions in Iraq and Syria. The result was still counterproductive: civilians were also dying in the course of the bombing, while terrorist leaders were gaining popularity and calling for an alliance against their enemies – the West, the US, Russia and China.

Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Yemen, Mali, the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Somalia came under the blows of the terrorists. They began to pose a threat not only to the region, but also to Europe, Russia and the United States.

Having set the task of removing yet another secular regime, Washington and its allies helped the anti-government forces, whatever ideology the latter adhered to. Their short-term goals were the same. Hence the attempts to temporarily “whitewash” rebels, counting on their success, and then “tame” them, although the experience of Libya or Afghanistan had proven the opposite. Hence the desire to engage international humanitarian agencies in delivering assistance to rebel-held areas under the slogan of “saving civilians from hunger and epidemics”. The intellectual, thinking opposition, which could really facilitate democratization of a particular country, was being squeezed out to the margins of the political process.

“As a result, the US found itself in this false coordinate system and to a certain extent under the influence of the very narrative it had forged”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva.
This manifested itself in making erroneous decisions and conducting unreasonable policies. One does not need to be a big expert to understand that if the Asad government in Syria fell, the country would be engulfed in jihadist chaos and its statehood would be threatened, just as in Libya and Iraq, and Damascus would have no effective structures to fight terrorists. In fact, the army and security structures would have been the first to be disbanded. However, a new, ideologically charged goal dazzles, and “memories” of impunity for past actions push along the wrong path, and all this leads to new mistakes, to the desire to whitewash jihadists, divide them into “good” and “bad”, explain their behaviour by “despair” and “hatred” towards dictatorship – in general, to invent any pretexts in order to “cover up” the fact that jihadists and the West “temporarily share their goals”. All this only weakens the international community’s potential in the fight against the terrorist contagion.161

The pseudo-reality created with Western and Arab media and information technologies influenced the behaviour of Western and Middle Eastern leaders. They did not want to perceive the real threat: if Syria’s state structures collapsed and the regime’s army was defeated, Syria would get the same jihadist system of power (anarchy) as in Libya, and Lebanon, Jordan and then Saudi Arabia would follow the suit.

“Having been directed from the very beginning of the crisis by the words ‘Asad must go’ uttered by its leaders, it (the West) in fact put itself in a desperate position”, writes M. Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva. “It was impossible to retreat without losing face. The surrender of positions would demonstrate to the whole world that Western states were bluffing and that they were incapable of achieving the geopolitical goals they had set. Jihadists became the most organized and well-armed force on the ground”.162

On 29 December 2014, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ad sectam the Prosecutor General’s Office ruled that the Islamic State (ISIL/ISIS) is an international terrorist group and banned it in Russia.163

A reservation should be made here that the phenomenon of ISIL – its ideology and structure – requires a special explanation, analysis and research that go beyond the scope of the present book. The author tentatively considers ISIL, Al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and the Taliban to be equally illegal, disgusting children of globalization, more precisely, globalization in the forms in which it was carried out. Islamist extremism is an extreme, ultimately doomed ideology of protest against political, social, moral values of the West, which are sometimes imposed by “soft” and sometimes – by “hard” power in a foreign civilizational environment.

Thus far, jihadists have challenged the entire world civilization, including Russia.

All this predetermined Russia’s military intervention in Syria in the hope of cutting out the cancerous tumour of terrorism in that country and preventing or restricting the spread of its metastases, while at the same time preserving, probably in a reformed form, a secular regime and achieving a political settlement.
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