

Terrorist threat in Russia: development of Moscow's role in Syria and reflections on internal security

On December 26, during a visit to St. Petersburg, the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev, declared his availability to host the talks on the Syrian crisis in Astana on January. The initiative stems from the need expressed by the presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey, at a meeting on December 20 in Moscow, in order to set a new pace towards a solution for the Syrian crisis, which has lasted for six years and claimed over 250 thousand victims. In a joint statement, the three countries have agreed to become guarantors of any agreement putting an end to the civil war in Syria. As a premise of the negotiating initiative, the three countries became guarantors of an agreement for a cease-fire between the Syrian regime (an ally of Iran and Russia) and anti-government groups (several of which are close to Turkey), which came into force on December 29 2016 at midnight. Russia, Iran and Turkey reiterate their determination to fight against the Islamic State and the Jabhat al-Nusra Front, together with the different factions that make up the Syrian armed opposition. Despite the result of having obtained the availability of several anti-government groups (including the Syrian National Coalition, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam) to sit around the negotiating table in Astana, by admission of Russian President Vladimir Putin, conditions that led to the setting of the new initiative are extremely fragile and related to the compliance with the cease-fire (which excludes, for example, the Islamic State and the Kurdish militia YPG - Kurdish acronym for People's Defense Units).

On the same days in which Moscow's diplomatic efforts came to fruition, the exposure of Russia to terrorist acts was also confirmed, with the killing, on Dec. 20 in Ankara, of the Russian ambassador Andrey Karlov, during the inauguration of a photo exhibition. Since the terrorist (an off-duty Turkish policeman), shouted phrases against the massacres in Aleppo, this episode confirmed the beliefs of dangerous national security implications following Moscow's engagement in Syria, earlier showed by the attack on a plane transporting Russians tourists that occurred in Sinai peninsula on October 31, 2015. In parallel to the vulnerability of symbolic and poorly protected Russian targets abroad, concrete threats also hang over the Russian territory, not only in North Caucasus (especially in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia), but also in Moscow and in other urban centers of primary importance.

According to official data, in the first half of 2016 crimes related to terrorism in Russia grew by 73% over the same period in 2015 (mainly associated with participating in illegal armed groups). Moreover, 5000 Russian citizens are said to be fighting as volunteers for the Islamic State, two thousand of which came from the North Caucasus. The threat of jihadist proselytism would also appear to be expanding to Western Siberia and Northern Europe. In 2016, in North Western Siberia, several criminal cases for acts of terrorism were opened in the autonomous district of Yamalo-Nenetsk (where 90% of Russian natural gas is produced) and in the autonomous district of Khanty-Mansiysk. In addition, in the Tyumen region (which comprises Khanty-Mansiysk) about two hundred men seem to have left to join the Islamic State; moreover, in 2015 an extremist was arrested, for attempting to recruit volunteers within universities.

The preventive and repressive activities of local authorities have, therefore, intensified.

On November 12, the Federal Security Service (FSB) has announced the arrest of 10 terrorists during operations carried out in Moscow and St. Petersburg, which led to the discovery of four improvised explosive devices that could have been used to carry out attacks in the two cities.

The arrests occurred during the investigation following the killing of two suspected terrorists in Nizhny Novgorod (central European Russia).

On December 3, a terrorist cell has been neutralized by the security forces in Makhachkala (capital city of the north Caucasus republic of Dagestan); among the killed militants was also Rustan Magomedovich Aselderov, one of the local leaders loyal to the Islamic State, connected to the terrorist attacks in Volgograd on December 29 and 30 2013 (respectively: in the railway station, 18 dead and dozens wounded; on a trolleybus, 16 dead and 25 injured) and the bombing on the Red Square, foiled December 31, 2010.

On December 15, four citizens from Moldova and Tajikistan were arrested, suspected of planning high-profile attacks in Moscow; in the searched apartments, the security forces found automatic weapons, ammunition and improvised explosive devices. On December 29, in Dagestan seven suspected militants of the Islamic State were arrested before they could carry out terrorist attacks in Moscow during New Year celebrations. Also in Dagestan, on January 1, two militants were killed during an anti-terrorism operation carried out in the Novolaksky district.

The synthesis of the most recent events confirmed a significant security threat posed in Russia by terrorist attacks, designed by groups related to the North Caucasus (especially Dagestan) and able to expand its capacity to act even outside that area, up to the main urban centers of the country. Since the extremists are affiliated to the Islamic State, it appears the ultimate reason of terrorist activity should be attributed to the Russian military presence in Syria and to negotiating efforts to end the war. The signs of radicalization from remote areas of the country increase the level of alert and outline a much more geographically extended threat.

Events:

● Mirziyayev elected new president of Uzbekistan

On December 4, elections in Uzbekistan confirmed the interim president, Shavkat Mirziyayev (Liberal Democratic Party), at the head of the country with 88.6% of the vote. However, the outcome of the vote did not come as a surprise and confirmed the predictions. The OSCE, which monitored the electoral process with an ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) mission, has encountered limitations in the transparency of procedures, in the predominant media exposure of government figures and in the absence of pluralism. Assuming leadership of the country following Islam Karimov's death, which occurred in early September, Mirziyayev (former prime minister since 2003) has pledged to continue the political line drawn by his predecessor, especially as regards to the refusal to participate in military alliances, maintaining troops abroad and granting military bases on Uzbek territory to foreign countries. Nevertheless, some dissidents abroad acknowledged the possibility to see, with the new course, the start of reforms in economy and greater openness to the outside. A first sign of discontinuity with the past has been marked by the improvement in relations with neighboring countries. Already in the first months of the interim presidency, Mirziyayev had initiated fruitful contacts with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with which, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan has ongoing disputes over the definition of common borders. Mirziyayev raised also further regional cooperation with Kazakhstan: on December 23, he received the visit of Kazakh Foreign Minister, Erlan Idrissov, with whom he discussed joint projects in trade, economy, investment, transport and communications.

● **Instability and infiltration of extremists at the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan**

On December 8, during the 23rd session of the OSCE Ministerial Council which was held in Hamburg, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Abdulaziz Kamilov, reiterated that Afghanistan constitutes a threat to Central Asian security, due to the porosity of the borders that allows a continuous passage of militants, criminals and traffickers (mainly drugs). For many years, militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have crossed the border on their way to fight in Afghanistan and Pakistan, alongside the Taliban and Al Qaeda. In 2015, its commander, Usman Ghazi, declared its allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Following the decimation of IMU militants by the Taliban, in a battle in the Afghan province of Zabul, there has been no news of Ghazi. In June 2016, an alleged IMU surviving group returned to communicate on social media, claiming to be operational at the side of the Taliban. Similarly, another extremist group, Imam Bukhari Jamaat, consisting largely of Uzbeks and present in Syria to fight for the Islamic State for years, has sworn allegiance to the Taliban in July 2016. Given this situation, neighboring countries fear the destabilizing potential of the redeployment in the region of returning militants, aided by the interconnections between the extremist groups in Afghanistan.

On December 7, in Bishkek a meeting of intelligence agencies from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and other former Soviet countries was held on the issue for regional security of returning extremists and how to prevent the recruitment of new militants in Central Asia. Although Afghanistan is a member of several diplomatic initiatives aimed at security, they have yet to achieve any significant results.

● **Constitutional reforms approved in Kyrgyzstan**

With the referendum held on December 11, 42% of the electorate of Kyrgyzstan expressed its favor for the introduction of 26 constitutional amendments, which increase the prime minister's powers, counterbalancing the role of the president. This is the seventh consultation to amend the constitution occurring in Kyrgyzstan since its independence. The first consultation was held in June 2010 and had marked the state parliamentary breakthrough, right after the unrest that led President Kurmanbek Bakiev to flee. Since the 2010 reform imposed no further changes would be made to the Constitution until 2020, the recent consultation is seen as an answer to contingent political needs linked to the aspirations of the current president, Almazbek Atambayev, who is unable to aspire to a new mandate and thus tried to consolidate the role of the prime minister, as a way to hold on to power.

● **Putin's visit to Japan**

On December 15-16, Russian President Vladimir Putin paid a visit to Japan, where he met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The visit was an important event both from a diplomatic and an economic point of view, marking a major improvement in bilateral cooperation. Japanese and Russian companies have concluded 68 agreements, particularly in the energy (in particular, between Gazprom and Mitsui; Mitsubishi, the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation and Rosneft) and renewable energy sectors, with direct investments in the Siberian Far East. The new agreements between Russia and Japan are a balancing of the growing Chinese influence in the Pacific region and mark the culmination of a series of gradual stages of approach matured in the recent years of Putin's presidency. However, the dispute over the Kuril islands remains open: lying north of the Japanese island of Hokkaido, the islands are under the sovereignty of Moscow since the end of World War II, while Tokyo claims the southernmost one, where Russian Navy bases are located.

● **General Assembly UN resolution on Crimea**

On December 19, the General Assembly of the United Nations has voted - with 70 votes in favor, 26 against and 77 abstentions - a resolution recognizing the Crimea as "temporarily occupied" by Russia and condemns "abuses" and "discrimination" against the population of Crimean Tatars, and other Ukrainian ethnic minorities living in the peninsula. Russia has protested, calling the "resolution" politically motivated and "one-sided."

● **Suspected jihadists killed in Chechnya**

On December 17, in Grozny (the capital city of Chechnya) a group of at least 11 militants took part in two separate clashes with police officers. Seven militants were killed and four captured. Local authorities said that the attacks were linked to the activities of the Islamic State. Although the presence of many Chechens among the fighters in Syria is known and the Caucasus republic is particularly exposed to instability and extremism, the dynamic of the episodes is still uncertain and any matrices other than jihadist are not excluded.

● **Visit of Rohani in Central Asia**

On December 22-23, the Iranian president Hassan Rohani paid a visit to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, after a first stop in Armenia. With President Nazarbaev, Rohani has discussed trade, investment, transport and agriculture, as well as Iran's next entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the progressive integration of the Eurasian Economic Union.

● **Twenty-five years of the Soviet Union's dissolution and new cooperation proposals**

On December 26, President Vladimir Putin held a meeting in St. Petersburg on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The meeting was attended by many leaders of the federated republics that were part of USSR. Putin declared his intention to promote a more favorable environment for investment in the former Soviet space, based on the experience already gained within the Eurasian Economic Union. In particular, Putin called for the creation of single markets for finance, natural gas, oil and derivatives by 2025.