

International Game between the Obama Administration of the US and Russia in the Fight against the “Islamic State”

“İslam Devleti”ne Karşı Mücadelede
ABD’nin Obama Yönetimi ile Rusya Arasındaki
Uluslararası Oyun

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Abstract

Since the “Arab Spring”, a variety of conflicts have erupted in the region and various extremist groups have emerged, especially the quasi-state “Islamic State” (IS), which has replaced the Al Qaeda to become the dominant international terrorist organization, main sponsor of large-scale terrorist attacks, propagator of extremist and terrorist ideology, and the object that many extremist terrorist organizations around the world are loyal to. The strike against the organization by the US and Russia, the two countries with strong military power and political influence, has been relatively effective. However, the US and Russia hold different views on the Syrian issue, so their measures to combat the IS have different foci. The US favors the Syrian opposition, while Russia helps the Syrian government to fight the Syrian opposition and the IS. Because of their different interests, the policies of the US and those of Russia in the Middle East also have witnessed some changes after the rise of IS, and resulted in a series of strategic

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games. As the two most important international powers in the world, the game between Russia and the US in Middle East has caught attention from all over the world. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the international game between the US and Russia on the fight against IS will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the situation in the Middle East.

Keywords: United States; Obama Administration; Russia; Islamic State; Syria

Öz

“Arap Baharı”ndan bu yana Orta Doğu’da çeşitli çatışmalar yaşanmaktadır ve birçok köktenci grup ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu gruplardan biri de kendini devlet olarak adlandıran, El-Kaide’nin yerini alarak en etkin uluslararası terör örgütü, büyük ölçekli terör saldırılarının ana destekçisi, aşırı ve terörist ideolojinin savunucusu ve dünyanın dört bir yanındaki birçok köktenci terör örgütünün sadakat gösterdiği örgüt halini gelen “İslam Devleti” (İD) dir. Bu terör örgütüne karşı büyük bir askerî güce ve siyasi etkiye sahip olan iki ülke olan ABD ve Rusya tarafından gerçekleştirilen saldırılar göreceli etkili olmuştur. Ancak ABD ile Rusya Suriye sorunuyla ilgili farklı görüşlere ve bu nedenle İD ile mücadele araçları da farklı odaklara sahiptir. ABD, Suriyeli muhalefeti desteklerken, Rusya Suriye muhalefetiyle ve İD’yle mücadelesinde Suriye hükümetine yardım etmektedir. Sahip oldukları farklı çıkarlar nedeniyle, ABD’nin ve Rusya’nın Orta Doğu’daki politikaları da İD’nin ortaya çıkmasından bu yana bazı değişiklikler göstermiş ve bir dizi stratejik oyunu ortaya koymuştur. Dünyanın en önemli iki uluslararası gücü olan Rusya ve ABD arasında Orta Doğu’daki oyun tüm dünyanın dikkatini çekmiştir. Bu nedenle, İD’yle mücadelede ABD ile Rusya arasındaki uluslararası oyunun tam olarak anlaşılması, Orta Doğu’daki karmaşık durumun daha kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Obama Yönetimi, Rusya, İslam Devleti, Suriye.

1. Introduction

Since the drastic changes in the Arab world, a variety of conflicts have erupted in the region. Coupled with the continued intervention of major powers in the Middle East affairs, this has resulted in continuous turmoil. In this context, the various extremist groups have emerged, especially the extremist organization “Islamic State”. It is a quasi-state which has replaced the Al Qaeda to become the dominant international

terrorist organization, main sponsor of large-scale terrorist attacks, propagator of extremist and terrorist ideology, and the object that many extremist terrorist organizations around the world are loyal to.¹ Since June 2014, the fight against the “Islamic State in Iraq and Sham” (ISIS) and its extremist forces has become one of the important issues for the international community; the United Nations (UN) passed a resolution that required member states to cut the funding sources of extremist groups in Iraq and Syria, as well as their overseas channels to recruit militants, and impose sanctions against the main leaders of those organizations. In August 2014, the United States (US) started continuous air strikes against the “Islamic State”; in September 2014, the US announced specific strategies to fight against the “Islamic State”, planning for continuous combats of more than 36 consecutive months.² On September 30, 2015, Russia sent troops to Syria and launched air strikes against terrorist forces, such as the “Islamic State” and Jabhat al-Nusra, and also set up an international alliance, including Iran, Syria and Iraq to combat the “Islamic State”.

2. United States’ Middle East Policy since the Rise of the “Islamic State”

For a long time, the motivations of the US policy in the Middle East include energy control, promotion of democracy, and security of allies, and is always shifting from realism to liberalism and vice versa. The stalemate in Syria and the havoc brought about by ISIS has considerably cooled the enthusiasm of the US regarding promoting democracy since the “Arab Spring”. The spillover effect of ISIS has forced the US to regard a regime change in Syria; instead, the US has decided to support the opposition and to establish control any political solution of the Syrian crisis, and eventually to dominate the future development trend in the country. To achieve this goal, the US

¹ Zhongmin Liu, “The International Anti-terrorism Has Entered a New Historical Stage”, *Wenhui Daily*, November 15, 2015.

² Juliet Eilperin and Ed O’Keefe, “Obama Announces ‘Broad Coalition’ to Fight ‘Islamic State’ Extremist Group”, *The Washington Post*, September 10, 2014.

implemented a series of combined approaches: adjusting the “new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan”, while urging the reconciliation in Afghanistan between the government and the Taliban; increasing the intensity of the air strikes against the “Islamic State” in Iraq; stabilizing Iran; taking initiative to reach a comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue; actively mediating between the two factions in Syria and its allies in the region; and maximizing the likelihood of implementing a political settlement of the Syrian crisis according to the will of the US. Even so, the US still faces many insurmountable difficulties, such as lack of strategic objective and ability, difficulties in balancing the Middle East and Asia Pacific strategies, difficulties to effectively appease all the allies involved in the Syrian issue, who have their own interests and perspectives at the same time, resulting in a lukewarm American Middle East strategy. The fight of its international allies against the “Islamic State” is flawed and ineffective.

2.1. The focus of American Policy in the Middle East: Fight against “Islamic State” and Response to the Crisis in Syria

The Middle East has been the US’s strategic focus for a long time. The US has an alliance relationship with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and other Gulf countries. The “Islamic State” infested Syria is surrounded by the allies of the US. In recent years, to reduce the strategic investment in the Middle East, the US vigorously promoted the reconciliation between the Taliban and the Afghan government; succeeded in securing a nuclear agreement with Iran in order to maximize its efforts and concentrate on the fights against the “Islamic State”. The US also tries to reach reconciliation with some hostile countries surrounding the actual control zone of the “Islamic State”, whose objective is to concentrate on Iraq and Syria.

Due to the two lessons learned from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, in the treatment of the civil war in Syria, the Obama administration tends not to send ground troops, but to rely on the Syrian rebels who are jointly supported by the Gulf countries and Turkey to overthrow the regime of Bashar al Assad. The reasons mainly include the following: Firstly, during the war in Iraq, the US had sent a large number of

ground troops, although it once successfully occupied Iraq’s whole territory, eventually it was bogged down in the quagmire of war and made the US very cautious in whether to meddle in Syria militarily. Secondly, the current economic slowdown in the US has affected both politics and the economy; the US does not tend to involve in the civil war in Syria with troops. To deal with the expansion of “Islamic State” and the tense situation in Syria, the US has adjusted its policy in Iraq, expecting Iraq to establish an inclusive government composed of Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish people. As the combat force of the Iraqi army is very weak, the US had to limit its involvement in Iraq to fight against the “Islamic State”, and strongly support the Iraqi armed forces in the Kurdish autonomous region. Because armed personnel of the “Islamic State” often hide in residential areas in Iraq, the effect of air strikes is limited and might hurt civilians. The effect of antiterrorism is also limited as the US only carries out air strikes against the “Islamic State” without effective ground support.

In order to mobilize all possible resources in combating the “Islamic State” and to avoid direct military intervention at the maximum level, the US began to reexamine its policies in the region. Acceleration of the pace of reconciliation with Iran is one of the important measures the US has taken. For a long time, the US used to adopt coercive diplomacy towards Iran. In the last two years, the relationship between Iran and the US has gradually eased, and especially after Iran’s President Rouhani took office, Iran and the US frequently sent each other positive signals. The Iranian nuclear comprehensive agreement has been reached, which has shortened the distance between the two countries. In return, the US will remove the sanctions against Iran.

Since the Obama administration took office, the US has been trying to withdraw from the chaos in the Middle East left by the Bush administration in order to deal with the game of the powers in the Asia Pacific area. However, the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” has led to turmoil in the Middle East; as a result, the US is still bogged down in the Middle East. The goal to balance in the Asia Pacific area is difficult to achieve at this moment. With the ravages of the “Islamic State”, the

Obama administration had hoped that Iran, as being a regional power, to be the “valve of stability” in the Gulf or even the Sham region (also known as the “Levant” in Western countries; this region is mainly composed by Syria, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan). Under the current situation in the Middle East, the US and Iran have urgent strategic needs of each other. The US has to shield the questions from its allies in the Middle East, to improve relations between the US and Iran with the nuclear issue as a breakthrough.

After the outbreak of the upheavals in the Middle East, the US and Iran both paid close attention to the situation in the Middle East, and confrontation around the nuclear issue is actually in a “tepid” state. As the “Islamic State” grows bigger as representative of the extreme forces, and the “moderate conservative” Rouhani became the President of Iran in August 2013, the US and Iran immediately talked to each other for the first time since 1979; the nuclear talks, which had stalled for a long time, were restarted and quickly achieved a breakthrough.

With the Iran nuclear issue agreement between Iran and the six world powers finally reached in July 2015, and especially after the Obama administration successfully resolved the counterattack from opposition in the US Senate, both Iran and the US regarded the serious implementation of the nuclear deal as a starting point to rebuild mutual trust and seek the development of normal bilateral relations. After a dozen years, the Iranian nuclear issue has experienced “twists and turns” in the past and the “easy resolution” at present; the core reason is that the US and Iran have mutual needs and choose to replace confrontation with dialogue.³

Iran nuclear deal is likely to lead to normalization of relations between the US and Iran and may also mark the start of “historic

³ Kayhan Barzegar, “Obama and Iran: Dialogue or Sanctions?” March 23, 2010, <http://www.belfercenter.org/publication/obama-and-iran-dialogue-or-sanctions>; Reva Bhalla, “U.S.-Iranian Dialogue in Obama’s Second Term”, February 5, 2013, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/weekly/us-iranian-dialogue-obamas-second-term>.

reconciliation”. In spite of intense bipartisan election games, the Iranian nuclear agreement is in line with American national interests and global strategic interests, even if the ruling party of the US may change in more than a year, the Republican government will not easily reject the deal. Both the US and Iran had misunderstandings on the nuclear issue in the past, the agreement results in a win-win situation for both sides, and a relief to both sides. The US can concentrate on the fight against the “Islamic State” and other terrorists, and finally integrate its Gulf allies and ensure their commitment to denuclearization. Iranian nuclear agreement opens the channels of direct communication between the US and Iran; Iran is now concentrated on the development of export-oriented economy to improve its people’s livelihood; the thawing of its huge overseas assets will also provide a “booster” to its economic development. Although Iran still occasionally resorts to slogans such as “US: The Great Satan”, “Eliminate Israel”, etc., relations between the US and Iran are moving towards normalization⁴ –this fact has more practical significance than those empty slogans. Reconciliation with Iraq has laid the foundation for the US to concentrate on dealing with Syria, that is, to promote reconciliation between factions in Syria and the fight against the “Islamic State” inside Syria.

Syria has been Iran’s staunchest ally for a long time, the US–Syrian relations have experienced “three ups and three downs” along with the changes of the times, that is, the establishment of diplomatic relations three times, and the break-off diplomatic relations another three times. From the perspective of the US, since President Bashar al-Assad formed a strategic alliance with Iran, Syria has posed a challenge for American strategy in the Middle East, and after President Bashar al-Assad’s reappointment, he continued to maintain close strategic relations with Iran, while he was hostile to Israel, ally of the US. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other US allies believe that since Iran’s 1979 Islamic revolution, Shi’a

⁴ Daniel Greenfield, “Obama’s Normalization with Iran Is Collaboration”, January 20, 2016, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/261539/obamas-normalization-iran-collaboration-daniel-greenfield>.

Iran's geopolitical expansion and sectarian penetration in the Middle East has posed a serious threat to the survival and domestic stability of the Gulf Sunni regimes⁵; throwing over the Syrian regime -Iran's ally- can effectively weaken Iranian influence. However, the Syrian regime resisted the "Arab Spring", which is closely related with Syria's national conditions, in addition to the power factor: the opposition was not able to effectively counter the political mobilization ability of the Syrian Baath party. In addition, Western countries accounted for a small proportion of Syria's foreign trade, so Syria was not affected by sanctions. In order to overthrow the Bashar regime, the US continued to provide assistance and training to the Syrian opposition, such as Free Syrian Army. For example, the US sent instructors to Syria to provide personnel training for the armed opposition groups; taught them how to perform urban fighting, offered air support, and provided equipment and funding.

2.2. The Current Plight of the Middle East Policy of the US

First of all, the US lacks strategic ability and will. Although Syria is under domestic political turmoil and split, the government is not only backed by Iran and Iraq's Shia sectors, but is also supported by military powers such as Russia; it is not easy to overthrow it. Syria and Iran are also aware of their mutual interdependent relationship of interests; therefore, Iran relentlessly declared that "we will strike Israel, if the US attacks Syria".⁶ In addition, the economic crisis has not been restored in the US, citizens are still in war-weariness, and there are contradictions between the Executive Branch and Congress with partisan struggles, which constitute a handicap for US strategy in the Middle East.

Secondly, it is difficult to balance Middle East strategy and the Asia Pacific strategy. The Obama Administration implemented a strategic contraction in the Middle East; significantly reduced the

⁵ Christian Carly, *Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century*, Basic Books, 2014.

⁶ Albert N. Milliron, "Iran: We will Strike Israel if US Attacks Syria", August 27, 2013, <http://www.politisiite.com/2013/08/27/iran-we-will-strike-israel-if-u-s-attacks-syria/>

strategic investment in the Middle East; and increased efforts to cooperate with Asian allies. However, as a result, this provided an opportunity for Russia’s intervention in the Middle East, weakening dominant power of the US in Middle East affairs. There is also a clear imbalance between the investment of US in the Asia Pacific region and the return it gets. The US expects that by re-shaping and strengthening the alliance, its allies in Asia Pacific region could help share the heavy international burden. However, the Asia Pacific countries are requiring asylum of the US, and are not willing to assume too much security costs and risk of confrontation, but it is often counter-productive. Most of the Asia Pacific countries hope to maintain a balance between China and the US; and do not want to choose sides.⁷

Again, the US’s relations with its allies are in crisis; the disagreements in distribution of benefits have not been settled, and the aftermath has not been arranged. Due to the support to the Kurdish forces in Syria, the US and its ally Turkey have disagreements. The US argues that Syrian Kurdish militants are the main forces fighting the “Islamic State”. The US’s support for the Kurds to enhance their autonomous ability through the Iraq War in 2003 and the current Syrian crisis will obviously have a direct impact on Turkey’s Kurdish problem, resulting in cracks in the US-Turkish alliance. In addition, the relationship with Saudi Arabia, Israel and other allies have also been affected by the Iran nuclear agreement. Moreover, with regard to the Syrian issue, a series of problems (such as how to set up a new government, who will be in charge of the future Syrian regime, and whether it is necessary to station forces in Syria) are related to the political and economic interests of the US and its allies.

Finally, the “limited strike” in Syria is not effective. In terms of strength of military forces, the Syrian government is clearly not an opponent of the US, but given the lessons of the war in Iraq and the

⁷ Zhengliang Yu, “Imbalance of the Rebalancing Strategy in Asia-Pacific of the United States”, *Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 2, March 2013, p. 4.

war in Afghanistan, Obama proposed a limited military strike. Although, in theory, the US military can perform “limited strikes” against Syria, the likelihood of escalation of the war cannot be ruled out because of unexpected and unpredictable factors, such as Russia’s intervention.⁸ Therefore, there is no doubt that the US needs to be more cautious in dealing with the Syrian issue.

3. Russia’s Middle East Policy since the Rise of the “Islamic State”

After the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, Russia has experienced a strategic contraction in the Middle East, and mainly focused on developing economic relations with countries in the Middle East. Its political and military influence plummeted, only maintained the alliance with Syria, which had been established during the Cold War, and maintained the naval basin in Tartous. Since the upheavals in the Middle East, Russia has been very vigilant about the “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria, especially when the Western countries united the Gulf monarchies and tried to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad, an action that crossed the line in Russia’s eyes. At the end of September, 2015, Russia intervened in Syria to fight the “Islamic State”. To expand the coalition, Russia, on the one hand, consolidated and expanded relations with Egypt and Iran, in an attempt to reduce the resistance of the military action in Syria to the maximum extent, on the other hand, wrestled with Turkey to show its strong will in safeguarding its strategic interests.

Russia has important economic interests in the Middle East. For example, Russia gains great profit from the production and sales of oil in Iraq. Therefore, in 2003, when the US wanted to send troops to Iraq, Russia was very concerned that the Iraqi oil resources and production potential would be taken by the US, and then resulted in direct and

⁸ “Putin Warns Russia could Come to Syria’s Aid over US Strike”, *Fox News*, September 5, 2013.

indirect damage to Russia.⁹ As a region of Russia’s traditional strategic interests, the Middle East is also an important stage to restore the big power position of Russia. Although the Middle East is no longer the priority of Russian diplomacy, it is still one of the focus areas of its national strategy. In the affairs of the Middle East, Russia often shows great strategic attention and tactical flexibility, sometimes staying away from the regional issues, and sometimes deeply involved in the region. After Putin became the President of Russia for the third time, Russia became increasingly active in the Middle East region. Russia made efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation with the Middle East countries, especially economic, trade and military cooperation. For example, Putin, in spite of the US opposition, insisted on the development of nuclear energy cooperation with many countries, such as Kenya, Zambia, Garner, Nigeria, and Iran, to help build nuclear power plants in these countries.

For Russia, the maintenance of the Bashar regime in Syria is of important strategic significance. From the perspective of geopolitics, Syria is one of the few loyal allies that Russia has in the Middle East; the naval base in Tartous is the only military base of Russia in the Mediterranean. If the regime of Bashar al-Assad regime collapsed, Russia would lose an important foothold in the Middle East. From the perspective of antiterrorism, the regime of Bashar al-Assad is an important barrier to curb the expansion of the “Islamic State” and other extremist forces to the north Caucasus region. If the Bashar al-Assad regime collapses, Syria is likely to be taken by the extremist terrorist forces, creating a direct threat to the security of Russia in the south. Therefore, Russia can hardly accept the impact and consequences of the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and rejected the UN Security Council’s proposal on the issue of Syria three times (October 2011, February 2012, and August 2012).

Russia’s strategic objectives in the Middle East include maintaining overall stability in the region and preventing foreign

⁹ Yu Zheng, “The Iraqi War Affects the Recovery Rate of the Russian Economy”, *China Business Journal*, February 24, 2003.

powers from unilaterally grasping the strategic initiative, ensuring normal communication of Russia and the Middle East countries, and promoting the stable development of bilateral economic and trade cooperation.¹⁰ In order to achieve the above objectives, Russia has adopted the following measures in the past two years.

3.1. Continuing to Support Traditional Allies, including the Syrian Regime

In recent years, as the only Russian ally in the Eastern Mediterranean region, Syria has been experiencing very fierce civil war between the government and opposition forces. As Syria's oppositionists are pro-US forces that try to overthrow the Bashar regime, Russia cannot stand by and watch any Syrian oppositionists overthrowing the regime. It is because of Russia's strong support of the Bashar regime, the United States' goal to overthrow the Bashar regime fails to achieve in a short time, which makes the United States strongly dissatisfied but helpless. Therefore, the US strongly supports Syria's opposition and, at the same time, puts pressure on the Bashar regime through Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other allies in order to achieve the goal of subversion of the regime. The antinomy between the US's and Russia's policies towards Syria has resulted in an international game of both sides around the Syria crisis.

Bashar al-Assad's stronghold is in southwest mountainous and coastal areas, strongholds of the Alawites; in offense, it can reach Damascus in the south and Aleppo in the north; in defense, it can return to the mountain area, achieve self-protection under the support of Russia. Although supporters of Syrian oppositionists have abundant funds, there are various factions within oppositionists with complex and tangled interests; their fighting capacity is limited, and it is difficult to form an overwhelming power of leadership. But because of the financial support from big powers such as the US and Europe, the regime of Bashar al-Assad is unable to clear the armed oppositionists,

¹⁰ Lijiu Wang, "Comment on Russia's Middle East Strategy and Policy", *Asia & Africa Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, May 2012.

and even fell into a precarious situation before the Russian military intervention. The rise of the “Islamic State” makes the situation of Syria more perplexing. Originally, the Syrian conflict is mainly manifested as the struggle between the Bashar al-Assad administration supported by Russia and supported the oppositionists backed by the United States and Europe. But after the rise of the “Islamic State”, the Syrian crisis has evolved into an international game among the government military, oppositionists, and the “Islamic State”.

In addition to safeguarding the traditional ally Syria, Putin said, in the ceremony when he accepted credentials from ambassadors of 15 nations in November 2015, that he hoped eventually to establish a real wide-range international antiterrorism alliance, which included the Syrian government, to coordinate action and support Russian troops to take action against terrorist organizations and facilities in Syria. Russia incorporated the Syrian regime, which is not recognized by Western countries, into the coalition it formed to fight against terrorism. The goal was to facilitate talks through fights; to grasp initiative and dominance in the political settlement of the Syrian crisis, at the same time, through highlighting its performance in counterterrorism against “Islamic State”; to master the moral high and international discourse right in the war against terrorism; to weaken the leading role of the US in the Middle East.

3.2. Expanding the Strategic Space by Developing Relations with Iran, Egypt, and Other Regional Powers

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s influence in the Middle East has not been as good as before, but it still maintains a certain special relationship with Egypt, Iran, and other countries. Since 2014, Russia has been actively repairing relations with countries in the Middle East, and has been attaching great importance to developing relations with Egypt. Russia and Egypt carried out extensive cooperation in the fields of politics, economics, and military.¹¹ In politics, the two

¹¹ Sergey Shoigu, “Russia, Egypt to Sign Protocol on Military Cooperation-Russian Defense Minister”, March 3, 2015, <http://tass.com/russia/780799>.

countries declared they shared the same opinion on the situation in Syria, and reiterated that they could not accept any interference of external force on the situation in Syria; in the economy, economic and trade activities between the two countries have become increasingly active, the list of Egyptian imports from Russia has gradually expanded, and the number of light industrial products and agricultural products continues to grow. In 2012, Egypt's trade with Russia was \$3.212 billion of imports and \$343 million of exports; in 2013 imports were reduced compared to the figure in 2012, but exports slightly increased, respectively, \$2.503 billion and \$442 million; in 2014 bilateral trade volume achieved an increase of about 80% compared to that in 2013.¹² In the military, in 2014, the total amount of the new weapons purchasing contract of Egypt was \$4.09 billion, in which purchasing contract with only the Russian technology company (Rostec) amounted up to \$3.5 billion.¹³ Russia also supplied a large amount of weapons to Egypt, including the MiG-25 aircraft, submarines, air defense missile system S-300, air defense missile system S-400, Beech missiles, and other advanced air defense weapon and systems. Through this cooperation, Russia attempts to restore its big power position in the Middle East with Egypt as a breakthrough.

Iran and Russia are neighbors across the Caspian Sea. Iran is an important channel for Russia to reach the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean in the south; with enough geopolitical influence, Iran also connects several important maritime routes and overland paths in Eurasia, thus improving relations with Iran is of the strategic significance for Russia. Due to long-term antagonism between the US and Iran with economic sanctions and blockade against Iran, Iran is also seeking reliable

¹² Russian Federal Bureau of Statistics, External Trade of the Russian Federation with Other Countries, http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b14_12/Isswww.exe/stg/d02/26-06.htm (Access Date: March 1, 2016).

¹³ Предварительные итоги 2014 года: заключены контракты на экспорт/импорт ВивТ на сумму более 80 млрд долларов, <http://vpk.name/print/i124221.html> (Access Date: March 1, 2016).

economic partners. Since the mid-1990s, economic and trade relations between Russia and Iran have grown gradually closer. They regard each other as an important trade and investment partner. In November 2015, Putin visited Iran and held talks with Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Iranian President Rouhani; the two sides discussed a series of issues, such as the oil and gas cooperation, the fight against terrorism, and bilateral trade, which laid the foundation for the formation of regional coalition in the fight against “Islamic State”. Rashid, an expert on Iranian affairs at the Islamabad Policy Research Center, believes that Iran and Russia have reached consensus on regional affairs; at present, they also agree to fight against the US and to support the Syrian government. Putin’s visit to Iran was aimed to consolidate bilateral strategic partnership, strengthen control over the situation in the region, and expand the influence of Russia in the Middle East.¹⁴

3.3. Military Strike against “Islamic State” and Safeguarding the Syrian Regime and Russia’s National Security

On September 30, 2015, Russia sent troops to Syria to carry out air strikes against terrorist forces such as the “Islamic State” and the Jabhatal-Nusra; the strategic intention is very clear: first, it is a response to the sanctions by the US and Europe and to find a way out. After the crisis in Ukraine, Russia was under the joint sanctions by the US and Europe, resulting in international isolation and a serious decline in its domestic economy. To get rid of the dilemma, sending troops to Syria was the breakthrough against Western containment and an important choice to win domestic public opinion. Second, it is performed to maintain and consolidate Russia’s military presence in the Middle East. The Tartous port is the only Russian naval base in the Mediterranean. After the military intervention in Syria, Russia quickly started the construction of the air force base in southern Lattakia and announced the deployment of the Sukhoi Su-34, Sukhoi Su-25, and Sukhoi Su-24 in the base with

¹⁴ Song Qu, Xun Yang, “Russia Improves Cooperation with Iran”, *People’s Daily*, November 25, 2015.

pictures of these aircrafts. Third, it was performed to protect Russia's domestic economic security. Tartous and Latakia are located in the west coast of Syria, with obvious military significance, and are close to the oil and gas zones to be developed on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, which is of great economic importance for Russia. Fourth, Russia has its own domestic security considerations. Russia has 18 million to 20 million Muslims, accounting for 12% of its total population. The rapid expansion of the "Islamic State" and internationalization of its members, especially loyalty from the Chechnya separatist rebels, become the concerns of Russia; in Syria, there has already been a Chechnya village with about more than 4,000 people, mostly from the Russian Caucasus¹⁵; recent infiltration of the "Islamic State" into the territory of Afghanistan and its attempt to encroach the Taliban's sphere have directly endangered the security of Russia and the Central Asian countries.

Russia's determination to combat terrorist forces is not a whim; before September 30, 2015, Russia had begun to transport military equipment to Syria, including tanks, missiles, aircraft, and the living board for resident officers. Communication and interaction between Russia and Iran have been very close, since the comprehensive agreement on Iran nuclear issue was reached on July 14. On September 28, the US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin held formal bilateral talks in UN Headquarters. Obama expressed willingness to cooperate with the Middle East countries, including Iran to carry out antiterrorism cooperation. At the same time, the Putin government officials and Israeli Chief of Staff & Head of Military Intelligence Bureau and National Bureau held talks and formed the mixed committee to oversee the safeguard of Israel's security in Russian military action. Putin expressed respect for Israel's security interests.¹⁶ Based on the

¹⁵ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Jihad For Export, Part II", December 6, 2013, <http://www.chechensinsyria.com/?p=15321> (Access Date: March 15, 2016).

¹⁶ Weilie Zhu, "The New Changes in Syria Chaos and Pattern of Antiterrorism in the Middle East", *Xinmin Evening News*, October 29, 2015.

above conditions, Russia sent troops to Syria. This can be called a proper disposal and an action with strategy in place.

However, the Russian military action against the “Islamic State” is not always successful. In November 2015, Turkey shot down the Russian fighter; as a result, the relationship between the two countries was frozen. Considering that Turkey is a member of NATO, Russia did not carry out a military revenge, but launched a series of retaliatory sanctions on Turkey in the economic field; the negotiations for cooperation agreement between the two governments were also suspended. Russia and Turkey hold different stances on the issue of Syria, for a long time, the Kurdish issue has been Turkey’s headache. After the 2016 Turkish failed military coup, Russia and Turkey had achieved rapprochement, the relations between the two countries have been greatly improved. Since the “Islamic State” control areas in both Iraqi and Syrian territory, Kurds have been an important force in the fight against “Islamic State”.¹⁷ Turkey is committed to overthrowing the Bashar regime, but the Russian air strikes help the continuation of the Bashar regime, which makes Turkey extremely dissatisfied. Due to the support of the US, Turkey’s hardline attitude also let Russia feel helpless; so in essence, the game between Russia and Turkey is still the game between US and Russia.

4. The Conflict and Cooperation of the US and Russia in the Middle East

Middle East was an important area for the US and the former Soviet Union during the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has only retained its special relationship with Syria, which is associated with its most vital interests. For a long time, Syria was not the focus of attention of the Western countries. Syria is not a main oil producer, and it also maintained a cold peace with Israel and its domestic situation is relatively stable. When Syria faced an upheaval,

¹⁷ Hermione Gee, “Islamic State: Turkish Kurds Help Their Iraqi Brothers to Resist ISIS Advance”, *Independent News*, September 6, 2014.

Western and regional countries started to intervene energetically in the Syrian crisis, which made the conflict between the Syrian regime and the oppositionists evolve into a protracted civil war, and provided an opportunity for the rise of the “Islamic State”. Although the US and Russia have their own plans in Syria and even the entire Middle East, in particular, regime change in Syria has caused a tit-for-tat struggle between the two big powers. The complexity of crisis in Syria and expansion of the threat of the “Islamic State” urges the US and Russia to reach a compromise, and presents a complicated coexistence of conflict and cooperation in the fight against “Islamic State”.

4.1. The Divergences between the US and Russia around the Fight against “Islamic State” and the Syrian Crisis

In order to curb the expansion of the “Islamic State”, the international coalition led by the US carried out a series of military actions against it, but with little success, the “Islamic State” is still in constant expansion. Since September 30, 2015, Russia has been striking on the targets of the “Islamic State” in the Syria. This is Russia’s first large-scale overseas use of troops since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In fact, both sides want to fight against the “Islamic State”; but the strategic objectives are quite different. The US wants to overthrow the Bashar regime in Syria through the hands of Bashar’s enemies, and therefore it did not contribute in full efforts in the fight against “Islamic State”, in order to consume the military strength of the Syrian government. In contrast, Russia’s military action in Syria is to back the Bashar regime. In addition, the “Islamic State” extremist organizations gained the allegiance of Chechnya, and threatened to “liberate” Chechnya and the entire Caucasus, which apparently concerned Russia’s national interests. In this case, the Russian military increased intervention in Syria and provided timely guidance to the political situation, highlighting Russian power and influence on the Syrian issue. However, the US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter said that the Russian move was a fundamental mistake and refused to cooperate with Russia, “we have not agreed to

cooperate with Russia so long as they continue to pursue a mistaken strategy and hit these targets.”¹⁸ The US is mainly concerned that Russia will compete for the dominance in the Middle East. After the 9/11, the US’s Middle East policy has been in constant trouble, “return to Asia” policy also shows that the US tries to implement strategic contraction in the Middle East, even so, the US still wants to maintain its leadership and vested interests in the Middle East.

From the perspective of the US, 90% of Russian air strikes in Syria did not hit the “Islamic State”. But the Bashar regime in Syria highly praised Russia’s military action against the “Islamic State”. Syria’s Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mualllem said, at the UN General Assembly, “the Russian air strikes against terrorism were a kind of effective participation”. But he also said that the air strikes should be coupled with the involvement of Syrian ground forces in order to effectively combat terrorism. The US Department of Defense announced on October 20, 2015 that the US and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding to avoid the occurrence of military conflicts in the fight against extremist groups Syrian territory. But, at the same time, it stressed that this memorandum was only to cope with the possible conflict but would not involve military cooperation and intelligence sharing between the US and Russia in Syria. Facing tough attitude of the US, Putin said, at the meeting at the Valdai club, that Russia’s military operations in Syria aimed at antiterrorism and helping the regime of Bashar al-Assad defeat the terrorists, and then creating conditions to solve the crisis, while the goal of the US is to overthrow the regime of Bashar.¹⁹

¹⁸ “Russian Strikes in Syria under Criticism for Not Targeting ISIS, Allegedly Hit Multiple Medical Facilities,” October 9, 2015, <http://www.kwbg.com/news-rss/russian-strikes-in-syria-under-criticism-for-not-targeting-isis-allegedly-hit-multiple-medical-facilities/> (Access Date: March 1, 2016).

¹⁹ Jie Li, The US-Russia Game under the Syria Dilemma, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-10/25/c_128355509.htm (Access Date: March 1, 2016).

Although the US and Russia adhere to their own stance in the fight against the “Islamic State”, the disagreements between the two sides have not been so serious as to cause the two sides to fight against each other –the communication channel between Russia and the US still exists, according to Mark Galeotti, specialist in the Russian security services at the Center for International Affairs, New York University. Neither Russia or the US can find sustainable solutions to the Syrian crisis by virtue of their ability; the two sides need to reach a number of substantive agreements in areas of common realistic interests, such as the fight against “Islamic State”, to guide the US and Russia to a new period of cooperation.²⁰

4.2. Limited Cooperation between the US and Russia in the Fight against the “Islamic State”

Both the US and Russia are trying to contain the chaos in the Middle East in order to obtain a strategic opportunity. The future involvement of the current game led by the rise of the “Islamic State” in the Middle East has not been clear yet.

2015 is the fifth year of the Syria civil war; the war has killed more than 250,000 people, and forced 11 million people to leave their hometown. In addition, the expansion of “Islamic State”, coupled with the crisis in Syria, has resulted in the worst refugee crisis since World War II. In this context, although the US and Russia have friction, there is also a possibility of cooperation. On October 23, 2015, representatives from the US, Russia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia held talks in Vienna, Austria, trying to resolve the crisis in Syria. This is the first meeting of the foreign ministers of the US and Russia since Russia launched air strikes in Syria. The Spanish ABC News holds the view that the US seems to have given up its objections to that Russia plays a role in resolving the crisis in Syria. The two sides tend to reach consensus in resolving the crisis in Syria and the fight against “Islamic State”. For Russia, it is not important whether the Syrian government is led by

²⁰ Ibid.

Bashar, but Russia needs to ensure that its interests in Syria are preserved. According to reports, US Secretary of State John Kerry said, on September 19, 2015 during a visit to London, with respect to the end of the civil war in Syria and solution to the worsening refugee crisis, when Bashar will step down “is not so important”, and said “it is negotiable how and when he steps down.”²¹ On October 30, in Vienna, at the enlarged meeting of the foreign ministers of relevant countries in Syria, the representatives of the participating countries passed a multi-point action plan to support a ceasefire in Syria under the auspices of the UN, to restart the political process, and, under the supervision of the UN, to elect Syrian leaders through the choice of free election in the future. For the first time, Iran was also invited to participate in the meeting. The position of the Western countries has also been relaxed: they no longer insisted on asking Bashar to step down immediately and were ready to allow Bashar to retain the presidency during the political transition.

On November 23, 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Iran and met with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Iranian President to get Iran’s support in a political solution to the Syrian crisis and fight against the “Islamic State”. At the same time, US Secretary of State John Kerry visited the Gulf States. On November 23, Kerry arrived in Abu Dhabi, appealed to the UAE’s contribution to a ceasefire between the rebels and the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the implementation of the political process in Syria, the isolation of the “Islamic State” forces in Syria.²² On December 15, Kerry visited Moscow, held talks with the President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. The two sides said that the two countries would strengthen communication and cooperation in the Syria issue and the fight against

²¹ Yu Yan, “Syria Crisis May See a Breakthrough,” *People’s Daily Overseas Edition*, October 27, 2015.

²² Xiaoyan Ma, Be Cautious when Travel to Europe: Multinational Anti-terrorism Battle Has Started, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-11/25/c_128467679.htm (Access Date: March 1, 2016).

extremist groups such as IS. Kerry said the US and its partners did not seek the so-called (Syria) regime change, and should allow the people of Syria to determine the future of the country. The US explained that, in the past few months, the it has changed its policy on the Bashar regime, because the “Islamic State” has become a priority for the US and its Middle East policy. The US and Russia agreed that, at present, both must make great efforts to promote the settlement of the Syria issue via the political process.²³ On January 29, 2016, the Syria government and the opposition started negotiations under the auspices the UN in Geneva. The negotiations are under the UN Security Council Resolution 2254; the talks are expected to last for six months. The start of negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition are apparently associated with the basic consensus between the US and Russia on the issue of Syria.

The refugee crisis in Europe and frequent international terrorist attacks push the world to resolve the Syrian issue as a priority. Russia, Europe, and the US all recognize the need for cooperation of all parties in Syria, in order to find the solution to the crisis. Because of the “Islamic State’s” role in Syria and the stalemate between the opposition and the Syrian authorities, the political solution to the Syria issue is still difficult to resolve.

In February 2016, the US and Russia reached an agreement on a Syrian ceasefire and urged relevant parties in Syria to implement and obey the agreement. At the same time, Syria’s President al-Bashar has unilaterally announced that the country would hold parliamentary elections on April 13, a move designed to safeguard the legitimacy of its ruling. Because both sides in Syria have opened the peaceful process and are about to implement the ceasefire agreement; on the one hand, the parliamentary elections may become an opportunity for

²³ Ning Wang, Yupeng Liu, “Kerry Showed Friendly Gesture and Made Big Concessions to Putin and No Longer Called Isolation of Russia as Necessary,” *Global Times*, December 17, 2015.

peace in Syria, on the other hand, the elections may also bring new crises due to the violation of the ceasefire agreement.

As Obama’s second term comes to an end, it is difficult for his administration to make substantial adjustment in Middle East strategy; meanwhile, Russia encounters serious economic crisis under Western sanctions, especially the plummeted oil prices and the continued depreciation of the ruble, which puts Putin under huge stress. Both Obama and Putin have hoped to make a difference on the Syrian issue and the fight against the “Islamic State”. After the implementation of the ceasefire agreement, both factions in Syria will still have a long run-in period; the “Islamic State” terrorism will try to sabotage, and the game between the US and Russia around Syria and the fight against the “Islamic State” will not end with the signing of the ceasefire agreement.

5. Conclusion

The strike against the “Islamic State” by US and Russia, the two countries with strong military power and political influence, has been relatively effective. However, the US and Russia hold different views on the Syrian issue, so their measures to combat the “Islamic State” have different foci. The US favors the Syrian opposition, while Russia helps the Syrian government to fight the Syrian opposition and the “Islamic State”. Because of their different interests, the UN and Russia’s policies in the Middle East also have witnessed some changes after the rise of ISIS, and resulted in a series of strategic games. As the two most important international powers in the world, the game between Russia and the UN in Middle East has caught attention from all over the world. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the international game between the UN and Russia on the fight against ISIS will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the situation in the Middle East.

Özet

“Arap Baharı”ndan bu yana Orta Doğu’da çeşitli çatışmalar yaşanmaktadır ve birçok köktenci grup ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu gruplardan biri de kendini devlet olarak adlandıran, El-Kaide’nin yerini alarak etkin uluslararası terör örgütü, büyük ölçekli terör saldırılarının ana

destekçisi, aşırı ve terörist ideolojinin savunucusu ve dünyanın dört bir yanındaki birçok köktenci terör örgütünün sadakat gösterdiği örgüt halini gelen “İslam Devleti” (İD)’dir. Bu terör örgütüne karşı büyük bir askerî güce ve siyasi etkiye sahip olan iki ülke olan ABD ve Rusya tarafından gerçekleştirilen saldırılar göreceli etkili olmuştur.

Ancak ABD ile Rusya Suriye sorunuyla ilgili farklı görüşlere ve bu nedenle İD ile mücadele araçları da farklı odaklara sahiptir. ABD, Suriyeli muhalefeti desteklerken, Rusya Suriye muhalefetiyle ve İD’yle mücadelesinde Suriye hükümetine yardım etmektedir. Obama Yönetimindeki ABD Orta Doğu’daki karmaşadan ve kaostan uzaklaşarak Asya Pasifik bölgesindeki güç oyunlarına odaklanmak istemiştir ancak ABD’nin Orta Doğu politikaları İD’nin yükselişe geçmesinin ardından büyük ölçüde değişmiştir ve bu politikaların odak noktası bu uluslararası terör örgütüyle mücadele ve Suriye’de yaşanan krize karşı verilen uluslararası tepkiyi yönlendirme çabaları olmuştur. ABD’nin Orta Doğu’daki sorunu çözmek için gerekli stratejik kabiliyete ve isteğe sahip değildir. Aynı zamanda ABD’nin Orta Doğu politikasıyla Asya Pasifik politikasını dengeli bir halde yürütmesi oldukça zordur. Ayrıca ABD bölgedeki müttefikleriyle ilişkilerinde sorunlar yaşamaktadır ve Orta Doğu sorununun çözülmesinin ardından elde edilecek faydaların dağıtılması konusunda anlaşmazlıklar devam etmektedir. Rusya’nın ise Orta Doğu ile güçlü ekonomik ilişkileri bulunmaktadır. Suriye’deki rejimin varlığını sürdürmesi, Rusya için çok büyük bir stratejik öneme sahiptir. Rusya, Orta Doğu’da Suriye rejimi dâhil geleneksel müttefiklerini desteklemeye devam etmektedir ve bunun yanı sıra İran, Mısır ve diğer bölgesel güçlerle ilişkilerini geliştirerek Orta Doğu’da sahip olduğu stratejik alanı genişletmeyi hedeflemektedir. Rusya, ayrıca, Suriye’ye askerî birlik göndererek İD’ye karşı askerî saldırılar gerçekleştirmekte ve bu saldırılarla hem Suriye’deki rejimi ve rejim güçlerini hem de kendi ulusal güvenliğini korumayı hedeflemektedir.

ABD ile Rusya, Suriye ve hatta tüm Orta Doğu konusunda farklı planlara sahip olmalarına rağmen, Suriye’de rejim değişikliği sorunu söz konusu iki büyük güç arasında aynen karşılık mücadelesine neden olmaktadır. Suriye krizinin karmaşıklığı ve “İslam Devleti” tehdidinin genişlemesi, ABD ile Rusya’yı bir uzlaşmaya varmaya zorlamakta ve

“İslam Devleti”yle mücadelede çatışma ve iş birliğinin karmaşık bir birlikteliğini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu mücadelede ABD ile Rusya kendi konumlarını korumayı sürdürmelerine rağmen, aralarındaki anlaşmazlıklar bu iki ülkeyi karşı karşıya getirmemiştir; çünkü Rusya ile ABD arasındaki iletişim kanalları hâlâ açıktır. Ne Rusya ne de ABD Suriye’de yaşanan krize kendi kabiliyetleriyle sürdürülebilir bir çözüm bulabilmiştir; iki tarafın da “İslam Devleti” terör örgütüyle mücadele gibi ortak ve gerçekçi çıkarlarını ilgilendiren alanlarda bir dizi önemli anlaşmaya varması gerekmektedir ve bu gereklilik ABD ile Rusya’yı yeni bir iş birliği dönemine taşıyabilir. Hem ABD hem de Rusya kendi stratejik çıkarlarına ulaşmak için Orta Doğu’daki kaosu sınırlı bir alanda tutmaya çalışmaktadır.

ABD Başkanı Obama’nın ikinci yönetim dönemi ererken ve ABD Başkanlığı el değiştirirken, ABD yönetiminin Orta Doğu politikasında önemli bir değişiklik yapması zor görünmektedir. Bu arada, Rusya, Batının yaptırımları nedeniyle ciddi ekonomik sıkıntılar yaşamaktadır ve bu da Rusya Devlet Başkanı Putin’i zor durumda bırakmaktadır. Hem Obama hem de Putin Suriye sorununda ve “İslam Devleti”yle mücadelede bir fark yaratmayı ummuştur. Ateşkes anlaşmasının gerçekleştirilmesinden ve ateşkesin uygulamaya girmesinden sonra, Suriye topraklarındaki tüm taraflar uzun bir deneme süreci içine girerken “İslam Devleti” ateşkesi sabote etmeye çalışacaktır. Suriye ve “İslam Devleti”yle mücadele konusunda ABD ile Rusya arasındaki stratejik oyun, ateşkes anlaşmasının imzalanmasından sonra da devam edecektir. Dünyanın en önemli iki uluslararası gücü olan Rusya ve ABD arasında Orta Doğu’daki oyun tüm dünyanın dikkatini çekmiştir. Bu nedenle, İD’yle mücadelede ABD ile Rusya arasındaki uluslararası oyunun tam olarak anlaşılması, Orta Doğu’daki karmaşık durumun daha kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunacaktır.

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