



## From the Syrian theatre of operations .... .... at the Russian internal political service

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At the beginning of the Russian intervention in Syria, the surveys conducted by the Levada centre gave 50% favourable opinions (70% for the most optimistic) among the Russian population. At the end of 2017, the population seems more reticent because even the most optimistic polls show only 50% favourable opinions. If Syria does not seem to be a major concern for the Russian population as the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of the Crimea were, this is partly due to the Russian media, which covered it much less and commented on it much less.

### **Perception of intervention among the population[1]**

Faced with a unanimous and controlled media production by the State (in particular through the control of television channels), the political debate finds refuge on the Internet. Opposition voices are few and far between, although there are associations such as the Soldiers' Mothers' Association, which use a protest discourse through their struggle to find out the circumstances of the deaths of their sons in operations.

### **The threat of Islamic terrorism on Russian territory[2]**

Chechnya and the Caucasus provide fertile ground for IA. Ramzan Kadyrov, President of the Republic of Chechnya, has been threatened with death and there is a price on his head. In 2015, the Russians estimate that between 5,000 and 7,000 individuals have joined the IA. An organisation called "Emirate of the Caucasus - Imarat Kavkaz" founded in 2007 after the second Chechen war is said to have pledged allegiance to the EI. In June 2015, a Chechen separatist leader reportedly swore allegiance to the EI, leading supporters in Dagestan and Ingushetia to seek direct assistance from the organisation in the Levant. The EI's official spokesman, Al Adnani, subsequently announced the creation of the North

Caucasus branch. Among the Islamists of the Caucasus, the authority of the EI has been imposed de facto by the pre-existing Salafist cells such as the radical movement Hizb ut-Tharir. This radicalisation of Islam, first traditionally confined to this region, is now being exported to the major Russian cities such as Moscow or to regions with a large Muslim population such as the Volga or the Far East. In September 2015, the government spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, revealed the constant involvement of the organisations in charge of the fight against terrorism, such as the FSB, in the face of the surge in threats linked to radicalisation. Since the intervention in Syria, the threat has increased. In October 2015, 224 passengers perished in the attack against the airliner 9269 Metrojet over the Sinai perpetrated by the EI in response to the Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict.[3]

### **The justification of the intervention by the fight against terrorism**

The announcement of the deployment of the military tool in Syria has been concomitant with Vladimir Putin's speech to the UN General Assembly concerning the establishment of an international anti-terrorist coalition. The fear of "colour revolutions" and the Arab Spring is certainly to be taken into account in the decision-making process that led to military intervention. Moscow has denounced the terrorist nature of groups opposed to the Syrian regime. The Russians attribute the term "terrorist" to both the EI and the Al-Nosra Front as well as to other armed rebel groups. However, they also work with Iranian-sponsored Shiite militias and Hezbollah. The military wing of Hezbollah is considered a terrorist organisation by the Council of the European Union in its latest version of 1 August 2015 published in the Official Journal of the European Union. 4] Russia therefore does not share the same vision of terrorism as the Europeans.

Moscow advocates the idea that eliminating terrorist organizations in their area of origin is more effective than trying to prevent jihadists from spreading on Russian territory. This rhetoric succeeded in federating public opinion at the outbreak of the conflict in November 2015: 55% of people are in favour of air strikes and 27% are against them. 5] Official estimates of the number of terrorists leaving for the Iraqi-Syrian theatre can be linked to the decrease in violence in the North Caucasus between 2014 and 2016. The figures put forward indicate that 4,000 to 5,000 individuals have joined the conflict zones in the Levant, figures that could reach 10,000 combatants if the fundamentalists from Central Asia are included.

**The question of the return of Russian-speaking foreign-fighters is therefore a major issue for Russian internal security. Indeed, as Jozef Lang of the Centre for Eastern Studies points out, 'the return of the Daech fighters risks considerably increasing the degree of radicalisation in Central Asia and consequently the degree of repression exercised by the various states of the region. This could lead in the more or less short term to the destabilisation of countries with the profile of 'failed states', such as particularly vulnerable Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan.'» [6]**

1] Author's interview with an independent journalist specialising in Russia and Defence.

2] Author's interview with a researcher from the Ministry of Defence specialising in Russian issues.

[3] MANDRAUD Isabelle. "Crash in the Sinai: Putin admits an attack and promises to "punish" those responsible", Le Monde, 17 November 2015. Available on: <http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2015/11/17/crash-dans-le-sinai-poutine-admet-la-piste-de-l-attentat-et-promet-de->

[punir-les-responsables\\_4811717\\_3210.html"](#)

4] Council Decision (CFSP) 2015/1334 of 31 July 2015, Official Journal of the European Union. Available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/fr/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32015D1334&qid=1440691334018&from=FR>

5] "Sirijskij-konflikt - The Syrian conflict", Levada Centre survey, 31 November 2015. Available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/31/sirijskij-konflikt/>

[6] LANG Jozef. "Exporting Jihad - Islamic terrorism from Central Asia", Centre For Eastern Studies, Commentary, n° 236, 14 April 2017, p. 1. in GAYARD Laurent. "Central Asia: the next Islamist hotbed, Who is the enemy, Conflicts, n° 15, December 2017, pp. 20-21.

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