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**U.S. strategy in the Middle East:
change of tactics, quit or defeat?**



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Summary

U.S. military operation in Iraq and support of armed intervention in Libya that were supposed to promote the “democratization” of these countries, led them on the verge of collapse and forced U.S. President Barack Obama to change tactics and declare the refusal of the forceful interference in the affairs of Middle Eastern countries. This policy coupled with deterioration of relations between the United States and its key allies in the region, caused a wave of criticism from both the Republicans and Democrats.

The next White House administration will have to consider the failures of U.S. strategy in the Middle East that led to the growth in anti-American sentiment and the loss of Washington’s leadership in the region.

U.S. strategy in the Middle East: change of tactics, quit or defeat?

The Middle East is currently going through a period of serious geopolitical transformation that leads to the aggravation of existing challenges and threats as well as the rise of new ones such as the spread of radical Islam and the generation of several minor and major terrorist groups, strengthening religious and ethnic conflicts, changing the existing political regimes and the threat of the collapse of certain states with possible changes in the existing borders. These issues are a direct or indirect consequence of U.S. policy in the region.

In recent years, the White House has declared the need to reduce the involvement of the United States in the Middle East affairs and allocate responsibilities between the regional allies of Washington. Critics of this approach from both the Republicans and Democrats are accusing the Obama administration of hesitation

and weakness due to which the United States is losing its leadership in the region as well as on the global level.

So what is the modern U.S. strategy in the Middle East and is there any strategy at all? What line will take the next U.S. Administration? The answer to these questions depends largely on the further development of the situation in this troubled region.

The basic principle of the American foreign policy over the past decades, is the idea of “exceptionalism and messianic role” of the United States that serves to justify its right to foreign expansion. President Obama confirmed such an approach again in May 2014 in a speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point where he declared on believing in American exceptionalism “with every fiber of [his] being”. According to Obama, the United State shall determine the strategy for the most



important global issues and dominate the international arena. “So the United States is and remains the one indispensable nation. That has been true for the century passed and it will be true for the century to come. America must always lead on the world stage”. Obama said that the basis of this leadership is and always will be the armed forces and the right of the United States to “use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it.”¹

The United States uses different methods of political pressure, economic sanctions and direct military intervention in order to maintain its dominance and provide the global leadership. Extensive information war is currently in action together with proven technology of unconstitutional regime change by means of the so-called color revolutions.

Belief in its own exceptionalism and the right to interfere in the affairs of sovereign states is compounded by the fact that the United States is not able to assess the possible risks and the devastating consequences of its actions. With regard to the Middle East, the inconsistency of the American new world order can be clearly revealed after the U.S. military invasion in Iraq in 2003. According to a renowned Iraqi politician, the occupation of Iraq displayed “monumental ignorance of Washington”² which failed to understand that forced regime change in traditional societies leads to chaos, civil war and rise of terrorism. As a

result, the system established with the help of the United States in the occupied country, was a complete fiasco.

However, the United States has not learnt a lesson. In 2011, the White House supported the military intervention of the international coalition forces in Libya. After the occupation of Iraq and the invasion in Libya, the United States declared that it would ensure the transition of these countries from dictatorship to a democratic state. In the end both of the Arab states are going through a period of decline and devastation, being actually on the verge of collapse.

The pretext for the U.S. invasion in Iraq was falsified accusation that the country produced weapons of mass destruction. Now we have more and more data proving that the intervention in Libya was also a result of planned disinformation.

For instance, the claims of the Western media in spring 2011 that several thousand protesters have died at the hands of Colonel Qaddafi were fiction. Human Rights Watch would later count about 350 protesters killed before the intervention in Libya — not the thousands as described in some media.³ Moreover, violence in Libya was almost over at the time when the Alliance invaded. Well-armed Qaddafi forces put to flight poorly organized rebels. By the middle of March 2011, the government forces were preparing to capture the last stronghold of the rebels — Benghazi, putting an end to the one-month

¹ Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony U.S. Military Academy-West Point. May 28, 2014. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/28/remarks-president-united-states-military-academy-commencement-ceremony> (last visited: 14.02.2016).

² Ali A. Allawi. *The Occupation of Iraq. Winning the War, Losing the Peace.* New York. Yale University Press, 2007. 518 p. P.14.

³ See: Jo Becker and Scott Shane. Hillary Clinton, ‘Smart Power’ and a Dictator’s Fall, FEB. 27, 2016. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html> (last visited: 22.03.2016).

conflict. However, at the same time, Libyan emigrants in Switzerland associated with the rebels, began to warn of the upcoming “bloodbath” in Benghazi. The Western media rushed to disseminate such information although it is now clear that this was propaganda. The rebels were defeated in the war, so their overseas patrons raised a genocide ghost to justify the NATO intervention. As a result, the intervention extended the civil war in Libya from less than six weeks to more than eight months.⁴

The number killed during this military gamble is still unknown. It varies widely from 8,000 to 30,000.⁵ Gross losses statistics were not compiled during the subsequent two years of persistent low-level conflict. According to Associate Professor at the University of Texas Alan J. Kuperman, “this grim math leads to a depressing but unavoidable conclusion. Before NATO’s intervention, Libya’s civil war was on the verge of ending, at the cost of barely 1,000 lives. Since then, however, Libya has suffered at least 10,000 additional deaths from conflict. In other words, NATO’s intervention appears to have increased the violent death toll more than tenfold.”⁶ Michael T. Flynn, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, believes that “this was a disaster. This was not a failure. It was a disaster. ... We made it worse. All I know is that in Libya we took a

guy out — again not a great guy — but a guy who maintained stability in a bad neighborhood.”⁷ The disastrous consequences brought by the military intervention in Libya that turned the country into a haven for terrorists, forced President Obama to admit the intervention as his biggest failure. Obama said it in his interview to Fox News Channel on April 10, 2016.⁸

Mistakes made by the United States in the Middle East lead to increased negative perceptions of America in other countries, and the idea of its exceptionalism causes the growth of anti-American sentiment around the world. The result was a steady decline in positive attitude to the United States over the past decade. In the end, the overall approval rating of Washington in the world shifted to negative from stable. According to a new Pew Research Center survey of 44 nations, anti-Americanism is particularly strong today in the Middle East. Only 10% of the Egypt population favor the United States. There is not much more support in Jordan (12%), Pakistan (12%) and Turkey (19%), while these countries are considered as the notionally Washington’s allies. The rates have fallen 17 percentage points in Egypt and 13 points in Jordan since 2009.⁹

The results of another global survey specifying which countries and in what way affect the situation in the world, showed that the positive

⁴ See: Alan J. Kuperman. Obama’s Libya Debacle // Russia in Global Affairs, 04.05.2015. URL: <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Fiasco-Obamy-v-Livii-17448> (last visited: 22.03.2016).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ In Their Own Words: The Libya Tragedy // The New York Times, 28.02.2016. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/02/28/us/politics/libya-quotes.html> (last visited: 28.05.2016).

⁸ Exclusive: President Barack Obama on ‘Fox News Sunday’ 10.04.2014. URL: <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2016/04/10/exclusive-president-barack-obama-on-fox-news-sunday/> (last visited: 28.05.2016).

⁹ 10 Biggest Critics and Fans of the U.S. Pew Research Center, 11.07.2014. URL: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/which-countries-dont-like-america-and-which-do/ft-2014-07-15-likeamerica-01/> (last visited: 18.04.2016).

assessment of the U.S. role was declining over the past three years. In 2014, the positive assessment declined to 42% and the negative one increased up to 39%. The United States is subject to the most criticism in Pakistan (61%), China (59%), Germany (57%) and Russia (52%).¹⁰

Due to all these processes, the White House finally realized the necessity to refrain from hasty decisions and military adventures similar to Iraq and Libya. According to the aforementioned speech at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, President Obama tried to explain to his audience that when the global issues do not pose a direct threat to the United States and when “crises arise that stir our conscience or push the world in a more dangerous direction but do not directly threaten us – then the threshold for military action must be higher. In such circumstances, we should not go it alone.” Moreover, he said that all mistakes of the United States made since World War II can be explained by the willingness “to rush into military adventures without thinking through the consequences.”

Foreign Affairs believes that pulling back from the policy of intervention in the Middle East “is less a choice than a necessity” because in a period of economic uncertainty and cuts to the military budget, an expansive policy in the region has become too costly. According to that view, the United States, like the United Kingdom before it, is the victim of its own “imperial

overstretch.”¹¹

“The likelihood of sustained U.S.-Chinese rivalry that will inevitably divert U.S. strategic attention to the Asia-Pacific region – suggest that the best Middle East policy for Washington would be something closer to what international relations theorists call “offshore balancing”: refraining from engagement in overseas military operations and forgoing quasi-imperial nation building to focus instead on selectively using its considerable leverage to exert influence and protect U.S. interests.”¹²

Another respectable magazine – *The Atlantic* – published Jeffrey Goldberg’s lengthy article named “The Obama Doctrine” as of April 2016. Obama himself defined such doctrine as “Don’t do stupid shit” that may be translated in more politically correct sense as “Don’t do obvious nonsense.”

Changes in the Obama administration’s foreign policy strategy can be found in concept-documents such as *the National Security Strategy* that was last edited in February 2015. “International Order” section of the Strategy emphasized a lack of the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and noted a need to develop the capacity of Washington’s partners to enable long-term stability. The document focuses on the collective action against the existing threats including terrorism and proliferation of nuclear weapons.¹³

Another main document – *the*

¹⁰ International Survey on the Influence of States on the Global Situation in 2014 // Centre of Humanitarian Technologies. 23.06.2014. URL: <http://gtmarket.ru/news/2014/06/23/6825> (last visited: 18.04.2016).

¹¹ S. Simon, J. Stevenson. The End of Pax Americana, Nov-Dec 2015. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/end-pax-americana> (last visited: 18.04.2016).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ National Security Strategy, February 2015. URL: https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf (last visited: 18.04.2016).

National Military Strategy adopted in 2015 specifies its attention on countering the key regional U.S. opponents. Iran which is accused of being a state-sponsor of terrorism is one of such antagonists in the Middle East, the other are violent extremist elements. At the same time, the Strategy declares a principle of combating terrorism by means of the regional U.S. allies subject to the American technical support (intelligence, surveillance, precision strikes).¹⁴

Relations of the United States with its regional allies

The Gulf monarchies are traditionally considered as U.S. allies in the Middle East. Over the years, this mutually beneficial cooperation was based on the principle of “energy resources in exchange for security guarantees.” However, the Obama administration began to change Washington’s regional policy. The changes included a significant reduction in the U.S. military presence and gradual cooling in the relationship between USA and one of its key partners – Saudi Arabia.

The security of the U.S. allies in the Gulf is primarily based on keeping balance of power between the Arab monarchies from one side and Iran from the other. During the presidency of George W. Bush this balance was maintained due to the U.S. military presence in Iraq and imposing tough economic sanctions against Tehran. However, the withdrawal of U.S. forces at the end of 2011, and the

signing of an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program between the P5+1 and Tehran in July 2015 led to a disturbance in the balance of power in the Gulf and provoked the escalation of intra-regional contradictions. Furthermore, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council were not calmed even after the US-GCC¹⁵ Summit held on May at Camp David and meeting of the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry with the heads of MFAs of the GCC countries in August 2015¹⁶ where Washington admitted its intention to speed up the supply of arms to the Arab monarchies (including ballistic missiles defense systems). Indeed, *Riyadh and its allies finally realized that the White House is not going to play the “one-sided game” in the Middle East, particularly due to the growth of its own energy production making Washington less dependent on Saudi energy resources.*

Growth of the Arab monarchies involvement (particularly Saudi Arabia) in regional conflicts in contrast to the soft U.S. policy indicates that the declared American strategy is clearly in action and the partners distribute among themselves not only the functions, but also the responsibilities for the actions taken. Washington more often takes over the support functions (logistics, information and intelligence) and military training thereby coordinating the direct action of Riyadh “on the ground”.

Reassessment of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is caused by the intention to find a balance between the protection of

¹⁴ The National Military Strategy of the United States of America, June 2015. URL: http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/2015_National_Military_Strategy.pdf (last visited: 18.04.2016).

¹⁵ The GCC — the Gulf Cooperation Council or the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf that is a regional private international organization established in 1981.

¹⁶ Secretary Kerry Meeting with Gulf Ministers in Doha, August 5, 2015 // SUSRIS. URL: <http://susris.com/2015/08/05/secretary-kerry-meeting-with-gulf-ministers-in-doha/> <http://gulffnews.com/news/gulf/qatar/complete-us-gcc-doha-summit-joint-statement-1.1561126> (last visited: 14.06.2016).

national interests and the need to defend “democratic values” that is required by the representatives of the American expert community. In this regard, Washington points out the reluctance of Saudi Arabia to carry out political reforms and the intention to prevent the political liberalization in neighboring Bahrain. According to the Wikileaks documents, one of the Democratic Party leaders Hillary Clinton being U.S. Secretary of State criticized the governance model of Saudi Arabia and accused it of sponsoring terrorist groups stating that Riyadh “remains a critical financial support base for terrorist groups.”¹⁷ In his turn, in the earlier mentioned Atlantic interview President Obama named GCC countries as “free riders” due to their insufficient (in his opinion) support of U.S. foreign policy and thereby provoked outrage of the Gulf monarchies.¹⁸ Certain American experts believe that the United States must convince Riyadh on the necessity of reforming the governance system in favor of constitutional monarchies, first in Bahrain and Jordan, and then in other GCC countries, because it is “the better way to secure these kingdoms.”¹⁹

However, the actions of the White House in response to this call reflect the commitment to the double standards policy. Washington requires from Riyadh for a greater openness and to provide anti-

monarchist opposition with the right to criticize the authorities. At the same time, the United States is supporting Bahrain’s ruling family and shows its tacit approval for repressive measures against the Shiite population of the island causing criticism of local human rights organizations. *Such policy led to the loss of the legitimacy by the Americans as an international arbiter and democracy protector in the eyes of the Bahraini public.* For some people of Bahrain Washington “is no longer a mediator. The United States is now complicit in the crackdown.”²⁰

Riyadh does not hide its dissatisfaction with the Western rhetoric regarding “human rights situation” in Bahrain. According to some media, certain people in Saudi Arabia believe that Washington is seeking to implement in Bahrain – the vital “edge” for the stability and security of Riyadh – a neoconservative strategy of “constructive chaos” despite of its failure in Iraq and Afghanistan.²¹ Saudis have obviously taken into account the fact that the White House “had a hand” in the events of the Arab Spring in Bahrain. Furthermore, The Israeli Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs reported that Obama ordered to produce a secret report on unrest in the Arab world in 2010. The document particularly noted countries from Bahrain to Yemen were ripe for popular revolt.

¹⁷ Leith F. Wikileaks: Hillary Clinton Claims Saudi Arabia is the Largest Donor to “Sunni Terrorists” Worldwide // Al-Masdar News. 23.11.2015. URL: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/wikileaks-hillary-clinton-claims-saudi-arabia-largest-donor-sunni-terrorists-worldwide/> (last visited: 21.05.2016).

¹⁸ See: Goldberg J. The Obama Doctrine // The Atlantic. April, 2016. URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (last visited: 21.05.2016).

¹⁹ Martin Indyk, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michael E. O’Hanlon. Scoring Obama’s Foreign Policy // Russia in Global Affairs. URL: <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Otcenka-vneshnei-politiki-Obamy-15602> (last visited: 21.05.2016).

²⁰ Bahrain’s Fake Sectarian War // Foreign Affairs. June 30, 2013. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bahrain/2013-06-30/bahrains-fake-sectarian-war> (last visited: 04.03.2016).

²¹ Bahrain: Is another Iraq in the making? // Arab News. November 3, 2013. URL: <http://www.arabnews.com/news/471626> (last visited: 04.03.2016).

Without drastic political changes, these countries would be subject to massive crisis. Obama emphasized in his directive that “U.S. policy should either help friendly governments [of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain] retain control or encourage them to make reforms that would increase the scope of freedom in a way that would satisfy popular desires without endangering U.S. interests and long-term stability.”²² In case of the fall of any given regime, U.S. administration was instructed to support “both publicly and behind the scenes”, the triumph of moderate, pro-democratic forces in order to prevent the formation of radical Islamist dictatorships inimical to the United States.

On the background of the reduction of the U.S. presence in the Middle East and the degree of trust between the United States and its traditional partners in the region such as Israel and the GCC countries (particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar), we observe an intensification of informal cooperation between Tel Aviv and Riyadh. However, such cooperation between the U.S. key allies obviously corresponds to the American interests, since it contributes to the weakening of anti-Israel climate in the Arab world as well as creates a reserve for the formation of a reliable counterbalance to probable strengthening of Tehran, and to a certain extent isolates the “Shiite coalition”. *Apparently, Washington does not oppose to the formation of several relatively equivalent “power centers” in the Middle East (Israel, Turkey, Egypt, the Gulf*

monarchies and Iran) competing with each other, but are dependent on the United States. Moreover, Tel Aviv and Riyadh play the role of regional “gendarmes” in such scheme. Military activity of Saudis in Bahrain in 2011, their intervention in Yemen and support for the armed Syrian opposition strongly confirm this idea.

In general, U.S. experts note that relations between the United States and the GCC countries fit into the concept of “new realism”, which involves the continued commitment of each partner to its core values and global priorities. At the same time, the allies maintain the cooperation in areas of strategic importance, such as energy, security of oil and natural gas transportation as well as combating against Islamist terrorist organizations.²³ These matters were discussed at the latest US-GCC Summit held in Riyadh on April 21, 2016.

Given the above, the current main task of the United States and the Arabian monarchies is to build a collective security system in the region, a sort of Islamic NATO. Such system will help to neutralize the differences between the Gulf countries and Iran without violence and armed conflicts. Moreover, the United States Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter proposed to create a “U.S.–Gulf” council of Defense Ministers to strengthen the security of the Gulf countries and coordinate the fight against ISIL.²⁴ Obviously, these issues will remain at this stage on the agenda of Washington’s dialogue with the Gulf countries.

²² Rubin B. The Secret Document That Set Obama’s Middle East Policy // Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs. March 14, 2013. URL: <http://www.rubincenter.org/2013/03/the-secret-document-that-set-obamas-middle-east-policy/> (last visited: 04.03.2016).

²³ A.I. Shumilin. U.S. policy in the Middle East with regard to the Arab Spring. Moscow, 2015, p. 332.

²⁴ ISIL — Islamist terrorist organization banned in Russia.

U.S.–Turkey relations in the Middle East are also experiencing a difficult period and these problems will only increase in future. The main source of disagreement between the longtime allies is the situation in Syria. At an early stage of the Arab Spring, approaches of Ankara and Washington to the Syrian issue were close to each other. They expected the regime in Syria to be changed with the help of moderate opposition supported by them including military support. However, the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict and the emergence of new factors led to the increase of contradictions between Turkey and the United States.

Ankara took a “special position” within the “Anti-ISIL” coalition created by the United States and it did not seem to be ready to implement blindly the strategy proposed by Americans, despite heavy pressure from the White House. Ankara’s position was the result of the differences in priorities between Turkish and U.S. policy in Syria. Even after the ISIL problem appeared on the international agenda, Turkey’s top priority remained fighting the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Ankara was explicitly disappointed by the shift of the attention of Washington and the international community from Damascus to ISIL. Focusing on the support of the anti-government groups in Syria during the Arab Spring, Turkey maintained its rigorous line of changing the regime in Syria despite the fact that ISIL had strengthened dangerously.

The Americans made an active “diplomatic attack” to persuade

Ankara to join the military action within the coalition created by Washington. In September 2014, by the U.S. Secretary of Defense Charles Hagel and the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Turkey. At the end of the same month, the U.S. Vice President Joe Biden met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan “on UN margins” in New York. After that, President Obama held a telephone conversation with his Turkish counterpart.²⁵

“Forced efforts” of the United States remained ineffective and led to continuous negotiations between the two countries. In particular, Washington was trying to obtain the permission to use Turkish Incirlik air base for air strikes of ISIL’s positions. Ankara linked the decision on the air base with the creation of “security zone” in Syria. Washington approached the Turkey’s plan reluctantly, taking into account the need to put boots on the ground of Syria in order to ensure the security of such zone. Along with this, the United States was aware that it would cause troubles with the Syrian Kurds, whom the White House considered to be its allies in Syria.

After the terrorist attacks in Turkey in July 2015, Ankara has begun a massive military operation against guerillas of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which were proclaimed responsible for the attacks.²⁶ Only after the beginning of this operation, Turkey allowed the United States to use Incirlik air base for reconnaissance flights in its fight against ISIL. It is obvious that the reason for such goodwill gesture was Ankara’s intention to secure that

²⁵ Obama, Biden try to win over Turkish president // URL: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/theoval/2014/09/26/obama-erdogan-charm-offensive/16244155/> (last visited: 14.04.2016).

²⁶ Davutoğlu’ndan PKK IŞİD operasyonu açıklaması // URL: <http://www.internethaber.com/davutoglundan-pkk-isid-operasyonu-aciklamasi-803310h.htm> (last visited: 15.04.2016).

Washington would turn a blind eye to its war against the PKK. At the same time, Turkey's unwillingness to participate in military operations against the terrorists in Syria remains a cause for complaint of the United States regularly calling on Ankara to extend its cooperation with the coalition.

Turkey is also dissatisfied with the U.S. policy concerning Syrian Kurds, particularly with the Pentagon's cooperation with the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is called the People's Protection Units (YPG). Ankara considers both organizations linked to the PKK and does not accept the interaction with them through military channels effected by the United States arming the Syrian Kurds under the pretext that the YPG is fighting against ISIL. In February 2016, there was a scandal between Ankara and Washington after the Spokesperson for the U.S. Department of State John F. Kirby said that the United States does not consider the YPG to be terrorists. President Erdogan struck Washington with harsh criticism by asking the Americans to choose between giving their support to Turkey or to "PYD and YPG terrorist organizations."²⁷

Washington recognizes that the PKK is a terrorist group and from time to time makes statements on its attitude towards this organization with the aim to calm down Ankara. However, there is no doubt that in Syria the United States completing their geopolitical objectives in the region, and it will not pay attention

to Turkey's concerns related to the PKK.

It should be noted that painful attitude to the PKK is shared not only the Turkish ruling elite and the army, but it is also wide-spread among the Turkish population. The Turkish Kadir Has University's survey published in January 2016 contains some information on this issue. According to the Survey of Social-Political Trends in Turkey, 39.3% of participants indicated terrorism to be the most serious issue for the country, and only 4.1% stated it to be the Syrian crisis.²⁸

In 2015, the number of respondents describing ISIL as a threat has also fallen. Those who describe ISIL as terrorists decreased from 93.2% to 86.4% since last year.²⁹ Under the 2015 survey, only 78% of respondents described ISIL as a threat to Turkey against 82.3% in 2014.³⁰

According to Prof. Dr. Sabri Sayar, the last four years have witnessed greater divergence than convergence between Washington and Ankara. One of the reasons is the divergence of strategic lines of the two countries in the region. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government is searching for greater involvement in the Middle East, and thus strengthen its regional influence. At the same time, Washington suffers from the so-called "Middle East Fatigue" caused by protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. That is why the Obama administration sought a policy of avoiding direct involvement in the regional conflicts and the backstage

²⁷ Erdoğan'dan ABD'ye 'PYD' tepkisi: Bu nasıl ortaklık? // URL: http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/02/160210_erdogan_abd. (last visited: 13.04.2016).

²⁸ Türkiye Sosyal-Siyasal Eğilimler Araştırması. 2015. Kadir Has Üniversitesi. URL: <http://www.khas.edu.tr/news/1309>. S. 13 (last visited: 15.04.2016).

²⁹ Ibid. S. 26. Last visited: 15.04.2016.

³⁰ Ibid. S. 26. Last visited: 15.04.2016.

crisis management.³¹

Dr. Sabri Sayarı also writes that the United States and Turkey have divergences in respect of the priority between the removal of the Assad regime and the fight against ISIL. Washington is concerned about the possibility of the formation of a radical Islamist government under the Muslim Brotherhood. Unlike the United States, the AKP would be quite satisfied with such scenario.³²

The Washington Institute expert Soner Cagaptay believes that policy differences between Ankara and Washington in the Middle East have been going on for 13 years (since the United States began to prepare the intervention in Iraq). The divergences became aggravated when the Arab Spring started in Syria. According to S. Cagaptay, Ankara turned a blind eye to the jihadists, who were going into Syria to fight the Assad regime, because Ankara's primary goal in Syria has been ousting the Assad regime. This has caused the Pentagon's wary attitude to Turkey and its accusation of Ankara's failure to foresee and prevent the rise of jihadists. On the other hand, Ankara saw the radicalization process in Syria differently and blamed a lack of U.S. support for the moderate rebels as the primary cause for the rise of jihadists in the conflict.³³

S. Cagaptay asserts that, despite the development of U.S.-Turkish military cooperation due to the fight against ISIL, the trust between the two countries has been lost. Turkey

supports Ahrar al-Sham "on the ground" in Syria. This group is close to al Qaeda. Conversely, the United States supports the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is only one degree removed from the PKK.³⁴

Turkish and American experts agree that the rapprochement of Turkish and U.S. positions on the situation in Syria is not expected in general as well as on the interaction with the Syrian Kurds in particular. In this regard, the experts predict further growth of tension between the allies, despite the attempts of the political elites of the two countries to maintain a dialogue and cooperation through the military agencies.

According to the aforementioned Turkish survey, only 35.4% of respondents answered positively on the question "whether the United States ally/friend of Turkey", while 64.6% responded negatively.³⁵

The range of U.S.-Turkish divergences in the Middle East is not limited to Syria. It also includes Iraq where Turkey has developed close economic and military ties with Iraqi Kurdistan³⁶ that often cause wrathful reaction in Baghdad. Washington previously pushed Ankara to rapprochement with its allies during the 2003 war — the Iraqi Kurds, is now concerned on the fact that this rapprochement is being beyond the control of the United States.

One more point of disagreement remains Egypt. Unlike the United States Turkey has not recognized the legitimacy of the revolution (July

³¹ See: Sayarı S. Turmoil in the Middle East and Turkish-American Relations // Turkish Policy Quarterly. Spring 2015. P. 119.

³² Ibid. P. 120–121.

³³ Cagaptay S. How the U.S. Military Lost Its Favor for Turkey // URL: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-the-u.s.-military-lost-its-favor-for-turkey> (last visited: 17.04.2016).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Türkiye Sosyal-Siyasal Eğilimler Araştırması. 2015. Kadir Has Üniversitesi. URL: <http://www.khas.edu.tr/news/1309>. S. 76. (last visited: 15.04.2016).

³⁶ Kurdish state entity that is a part of Iran, which has the status of an autonomous region.

3, 2013). The gap in the views on the events in the key country of the Arab world does not help to grow confidence between Ankara and Washington. The situation is worsening due to the development of military cooperation between the United States and Egypt, while the diplomatic relations between Ankara and Cairo is suspended.

In general, we can say that at the beginning of 2016, U.S.-Turkish relations in the Middle East is a complex picture consisting of a significant number of contradictions that tend to an aggravation, especially in Syria.

Relations between the United States and Egypt remained tense since the toppling of Mohamed Morsi and up to 2014. Another rapprochement occurred only after the unannounced visit of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry to Cairo in early 2014 and the partial “unfreezing” of funds (\$575 million) sent by USA to support the army and the Egyptian economy in 2013. A possible reason for Washington to return to the policy of rapprochement with Egypt could be a flurry of activity by regional jihadist groups and ISIL. This is evidenced by a later official visit of John Kerry held in October 2014, during which he discussed with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry the possibility for “reaching a final settlement for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” and “regional [security] issues”.³⁷ It should also be noted that despite all the visible internal problems of Egypt, in 2014 the U.S. Congress approved the allocation of

\$ 1.3 billion to support the Egyptian military program.

The final decision on the resumption of arms supplies to Egypt was made by President Barack Obama on March 31, 2015 and was a surprise for critics of the Egyptian regime.³⁸ The United States decided that military cooperation with Egypt is more consistent with their political interests, rather than the further process of the country’s “democratization”.

Western experts believe that a rapprochement between Washington and Cairo is based on the “strategic calculation” of the U.S. President’s administration and more likely has a transitional nature.³⁹ Nevertheless, Egypt not turning into a complete staging area of the United States, provides certain preferences to its overseas partners. For instance, U.S. naval ships have access to the Suez Canal, and Egypt allows American military aircraft to fly over Egyptian airspace. *Political cooperation with Egypt facilitates the alignment of U.S. policy in the Middle East, as Cairo plays an important mediating role by restraining the region from the next Arab-Israeli conflict and bonding a naturally formed “anti-Iranian coalition.”*

However, a range of existing problems in Egypt such as weak economy and tense internal political situation may have a negative impact on future relations with Washington particularly after the further election of the U.S. President and the “reset” of foreign policy that will certainly happen after the appointment of the

³⁷ Remarks With Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry After Their Meeting. US Department of State. 12.10.2014. URL: <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/10/232898.htm> (last visited: 12.04.2016).

³⁸ See: Roberta Rampton, Arshad Mohammed. Obama ends freeze on U.S. military aid to Egypt // Reuters. URL: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-egypt-military-idUSKBN0MR2GR20150331> (last visited: 12.04.2016).

³⁹ See: Michael Wahid Hanna. Getting Over Egypt. Foreign Affairs. November/December 2015 Issue. URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/getting-over-egypt> (last visited: 12.04.2016).

next presidential administration.

U.S. policy towards the Kurds.

The Kurds are relatively new U.S. allies in the region. Following the military invasion in Iraq, Washington has actively contributed to the establishment of the Kurdistan Region in this country. During the period of the American occupation administration (2003–2011), Kurds received a “broad autonomy” with the center in Erbil together with the essential political advantages. In contrast, Syrian Kurds have always been in tense relations with the Assad regime, and after the start of fighting between government troops and ISIL, the region of Kurdish compact residence (today is the union of cantons) was squeezed between the Syrian-Turkish border strip and territories under the control of jihadists. The difference between Syrian and Iraqi Kurds also exists in the political dimension. The leader of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) Saleh Muslim is the successor of the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), while the president of Iraqi Kurdistan and the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Masoud Barzani is a supporter of “localized” Iraqi version of Kurdish nationalism and even builds economic cooperation with Turkey. Despite the abovementioned differences, Washington began to strengthen relations with both Syrian (Western) and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Official cooperation between Syrian Kurds and the United States began after ISIL’s attack on Kobani in September 2014. The attack

on Kobani began with capturing 350 villages and towns, and the response of the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in cooperation with the Free Syrian Army (temporary military alliance named “Euphrates Volcano”).

The alliance began to push back against ISIL only in January 2015 (the siege lasted 112 days) with U.S. air support. Kobani was recaptured on January 27, 2015.⁴⁰ However, the surrounding areas remained under ISIL control until April 2015. According to various sources from 4,000 to 6,000 people died during the siege. Number of refugees counted nearly for half a million people.

After the liberation of Kobani and relative strengthening of other cantons of Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava), political leaders of Syrian Kurds began to talk about joint plans with the United States for the liberation of Raqqa, which is a regional outpost of ISIL. However, in the autumn of 2015 the Pentagon doubted the practicability of YPG’s participation in the battle for Raqqa and suggested that this task will be probably undertaken by other group fighting ISIL – Syrian Arab Coalition⁴¹ being a member (along with YPG) of the “umbrella” group of the Syrian Democratic Forces that today comprises all pro-U.S. opposition groups in Syria.

In March 2016, it became known that the U.S. Air Force began using the territory of Western Kurdistan to establish American military bases. Two new U.S. air bases were opened in the city Rumeilan (Al-Hasakah Governorate) and in the southeast of

⁴⁰ YPG retakes the entire city of Ayn al-Arab “Kobani” after 112 days of clashes with IS militants. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. 26.01.15. URL: <http://www.syriaohr.com/en/2015/01/26/ypg-retakes-the-entire-city-of-ayn-al-arab-kobani-after-112-days-of-clashes-with-is-militants-2/> (last visited: 14.02.2016).

⁴¹ E. Mora. Pentagon unsure if kurds allegedly armed by US will attack ISIS in Raqqa. Breitbart. 24.10.15. URL: <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/10/24/pentagon-unsure-kurds-allegedly-armed-u-s-will-attack-isis-raqqa/> (last visited: 14.02.2016).

Kobani. According to representatives of the Kurds, the new air bases would be used by the United States for logistics and supplying the SDF, which in general was not true. April 29, 2016 Washington confirmed that the U.S. air base was used for deploying additional military personnel in Syria.⁴²

We assume that building up the U.S. air bases in Syria could be a consequence of the escalation of relations between Turkey and the United States, as so far the main U.S. base for fighting ISIL was Incirlik air base located on the territory of Turkey. In addition, we cannot exclude the probability that the new U.S. air bases could be further used against Syrian government forces.

Thus, the military cooperation with Syrian Kurds allows Washington to “sneak” in Syria and safely dig in there through the creation of a military base and other military facilities.

The cooperation between the United States and Iraqi Kurdistan has the political and strategic nature and differs greatly from “tactical” cooperation with the Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava) due to the continuing geopolitical tensions between Iran and the United States. Washington is aware of the potential danger for U.S. policy posed by Iran’s expansion in the Middle East and uses Erbil as a kind of counterweight to Baghdad that became close to Iran since the withdrawal of U.S. forces

(in 2011). This explains private “unannounced visits” of U.S. political establishment to Iraqi Kurdistan⁴³ and to some extent Masoud Barzani’s everlasting statements that people of Iraqi Kurdistan are ready to hold a referendum on the issue of the legal status of autonomy and complete separation from Iraq. It should be noted that the most serious problem for the Iraqi Kurdistan is the question of ownership of the disputed territories of Kirkuk that are extremely necessary for Baghdad and Erbil due to the fact that this region is rich in oil reserves. The United States is trying to influence on the process. In 2014, Erbil announced the opening of the Middle East Research Institute (MERI)⁴⁴ with the assistance of the United States. Experts of the Institute are responsible for the development of a “road map” to solve the problem of Kirkuk’s ownership and its “reKurdization”, which is complicated by the diverse composition of the population living in the disputed territories.

After attack of ISIL on Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan has made great efforts to stop the advance of terrorists in the country. Following the capture of Mosul by ISIL ended on June 10, 2014, the official Erbil and Peshmerga forces⁴⁵ took preventive measures to avoid the capture of Kirkuk. On June 13, 2014 Kurdish forces stepped into Kirkuk fled by Iraqi troops and obtained dozens of abandoned military equipment.⁴⁶ Fighting against ISIL, Iraqi Kurdistan sought the help of

⁴² ‘Violation of sovereignty’: Moscow slams Obama decision to send 250 more US troops to Syria // Russia Today. 29.04.2016. URL: <https://www.rt.com/news/341342-us-syria-violation-sovereignty/> (last visited: 14.02.2016).

⁴³ Biden arrived with an unannounced visit to the Iraqi Kurdistan // TASS. 28.04.2016. URL: <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3248834> (last visited: 14.02.2016).

⁴⁴ Middle East Research Institute. URL: <http://www.meri-k.org/about-us/overview/> (last visited: 14.02.2016).

⁴⁵ Kurdish paramilitary troops (military forces) of Iraqi Kurdistan

⁴⁶ Ruth Sherlock, Carol Malouf. Iraq crisis: al-Qaeda inspired forces battle Kurdish fighters on the frontline of a new war // Telegraph. 12.06.14. URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10896557/Iraq-crisis-al-Qaeda-inspired-forces-battle-Kurdish-fighters-on-the-frontline-of-a-new-war.html> (last visited: 21.02.2016).

the United States. In February of the following year, Kurdish President Barzani said that Kurdistan Region did not need a direct military help of any other force, despite the losses in the Peshmerga (nearly 1,000 soldiers dead and 4,000 wounded). However, Barzani emphasized the importance of air support from the air forces of the Western coalition coordinated by the United States. He said that without those airstrikes “the war would have dragged on with more casualties.”⁴⁷ In November 2015, the Peshmerga and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) together with the Yezidi militia and with the support of the U.S. Air Forces liberated Sinjar occupied by ISIL. However, despite a significant progress in fighting ISIL, the exact timing of the liberation of Mosul has not yet been stated. According to the Kurdistan Region’s Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, the Mosul offensive could not probably happen in 2016 due to several organizational reasons.⁴⁸

The United States continue to finance Iraqi Kurdistan in an active way. On April 16, 2016, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced that the Peshmerga units will receive financial support equal to \$415 million, and the aid will not be limited to money assistance. Iraqi Kurdistan will receive high-mobility artillery rocket systems (HIMARS), and 217 additional military advisers will instruct the Peshmerga.⁴⁹

At the same time, Carter points out that the American steps to supply and provide training of the armed forces of Iraqi Kurdistan are not

“therapeutic” and pursue a purely practical purpose. Most likely, this aid marks the beginning of the final phase in the fight against ISIL within the territory of Iraq.

Washington’s response to the Russian Aerospace Forces’ actions in Syria

In accordance with the reconsidered U.S. approach to the Middle East, the foreign U.S. allies in Syria became moderate local opposition groups formally acting against radical jihadists as well as against the “authoritarian rule”.

The United States began to actively support such groups at the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 and this cooperation has acquired a new meaning after the refusal of the military intervention in Syria in 2013. Certain groups of the Free Syrian Army actually became the main pro-American actors in the region. However, after an active territorial expansion of ISIL and “totalization” of the Syrian conflict, the American idea of supporting moderate political opposition run out of steam. “Pro-Western” forces could not compete with the religious fanatics and ethnic militant groups.

Anti-terrorist operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces is perceived in the United States as a geopolitical challenge that Russia proposed to Washington, and has generated a discussion on what should do American leaders under these circumstances. U.S. media, experts and politicians started a campaign

⁴⁷ President Barzani: Iraq has last chance to stay together. Rudaw. 07.02.2015. URL: <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/070220151> (last visited: 21.02.2016).

⁴⁸ Offensive against Islamic State in Mosul unlikely in 2016 // Iraqi Kurdish deputy PM. 16.01.2016. URL: <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-idINKCN0UU0C1> (last visited: 21.02.2016).

⁴⁹ Pellerin C.. Carter: Next Steps in Iraq ISIL Fight Include More Troops, Military Equipment. Department of Defense. 19.04.2016. URL: <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/737764/carter-next-steps-in-iraq-isil-fight-include-more-troops-military-equipment> (last visited: 21.02.2016).

to demonize Russian operation in the opinion of the public. Media regularly reported on killed civilians as a result of Russian air strikes. Another argument was that Moscow airstrikes the opposition instead of terrorists and thereby supports the Assad regime.

However, despite of the tough criticism in the public spotlight, the operation eventually became the catalyst for the process of settlement of the Syrian crisis and the formation of a broad coalition to fight against ISIL. This was facilitated by the establishment of contacts between the Russian military forces and a number of anti-government groups expressed their willingness for joint actions against terrorists.

Successes of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria have made possible the beginning of the peace process. By April 2016, 52 armed groups joined to the cease-fire regime, and those who refused to do this, demonstrated a lack of negotiability that discouraged the growth of their popularity among the population.

At the beginning of the Russian military operation in Syria, the United States announced that it would not cooperate with the Russian Federation. U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter announced on October 8, 2015 that Washington was not going to assist Russia in its Syrian operation and Russian strategy itself was a “tragic mistake.” Even so, the U.S. position has changed in the following months. After the visits to Moscow by the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and CIA Head John Brennan in March 2016, the media reported that Russia and the United States are ready

for military coordination against ISIL.⁵⁰ Then the issue of cooperation ended in deadlock, particularly due to the failure of the next round of the Geneva talks and the deploying of U.S. military experts in Syria on April 29, 2016 that was named “ground invasion” by the official Damascus.

The United States is formally refusing to join the anti-terrorist operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria; however, it had to recognize the successes of the Russian forces. Both sides signed a memorandum of understanding regarding measures to minimize the risk of inflight incidents between coalition and Russian aircraft operating in Syrian air space.

Why Americans criticize Obama?

The failures of U.S. policy in Iraq and Libya helped Washington to realize that in case of the toppling of the Assad regime, the country could be taken by the jihadists. As a result, the United States has not provided the Syrian opposition with heavy weapons fearing that it falls into the hands of terrorists. In this regard, Assad became to Obama a lesser evil than the jihadists. However, Washington painfully perceived the U.S.-Russia agreement on the transfer of Syrian chemical weapon reserves under the control of the international community and its actual refusal to invade Syria, which allowed Russia to begin later its own anti-terrorist operation in the country. The U.S. establishment view this as a threat to the country’s “exceptionalism” and its leadership in the region and in world affairs.

As a result, the American “hawks”

⁵⁰ See: P. Wintour. Russia and US 'planning military coordination against Isis in Syria' // The Guardian. 30.03.2016. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/30/russia-and-us-planning-military-coordination-against-isis-in-syria> (last visited: 19.03.2016).

attacked President Obama with strong criticism, and the American media have published a series of articles with eloquent titles: “Russia takes over the function of the United States in the Middle East”, “Russia in the Middle East: the bear returns”, “Obama is failing the Middle East”, “You Can’t Beat Putin, Because He’s Already Won”.⁵¹ The most emotionally it was expressed by the American journalist Roger Cohen saying that the incident “on Assad’s use of chemical weapons was a pivotal moment in which he undermined America’s word, incurred the lasting fury of Sunni Persian Gulf allies, shored up Assad ... and opened the way for Putin to determine Syria’s fate.” In the end, Cohen said that “Syria has been the bloody graveyard of American conviction,” and “a debacle of such dimensions that it may overshadow the president’s domestic achievements.”⁵²

Even a political heavyweight like Henry Kissinger always careful in his assessments, believes that “American policy has sought to straddle the motivations of all parties and is therefore on the verge of losing the ability to shape events. The U.S. is now opposed to, or at odds in some way or another with, all parties in the region.”⁵³

Accusations in respect of Obama of hesitation and weakness showed in the Middle East suggest that the new

U.S. Administration of the White House is unlikely to stick with the current policy in the region. For instance, the next most probable U.S. President Hillary Clinton actively supported the military intervention in Libya. In contrast to Obama, she claims that it was the right decision, and the problem is only in the fact that “it was not accomplished.”⁵⁴

Nevertheless, the next U.S. President will inevitably have to deal with the fact that the United States is experiencing a decline of its prestige and influence in the Middle East and does not seem the only state able to influence the course of the world developments or define them. Enormous financial and human losses due to military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have led to the fact that the United States also lost an inner desire to be the sole global leader. This can be demonstrated under the results of a survey made by Pew Research Center in May 2016. According to the survey, 57% of Americans want the United States to deal with its own problems, while letting other countries get along with their problems. Just 37% believe the United States “should help other countries deal with their problems.” And more Americans say the United States does too much (41%), rather than too little (27%), to solve global issues.⁵⁵

British Financial Times notes that

⁵¹ See: Daniel Altman. You Can’t Beat Putin, Because He’s Already Won // Foreign Policy. 08.04.2014. URL: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/04/08/you_cant_beat_putin_because_hes_already_won (last visited: 19.03.2016); Obama is failing the Middle East // The Washington Post. 26.10.2013. URL: http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mccain-and-graham-obama-is-failing-the-middle-east-and-us-interests-there/2013/10/25/47e8f016-3d83-11e3-a94f-b58017bfee6c_story.htm (last visited: 19.03.2016).

⁵² Cohen R. America’s Syrian Shame // The New York Times. 08.02.2016. URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/09/opinion/americas-syrian-shame.html?_r=1 (last visited: 19.03.2016)

⁵³ Kissinger H. A Path Out of the Middle East Collapse Oct. 16, 2015. URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-path-out-of-the-middle-east-collapse-1445037513> (last visited: 19.03.2016).

⁵⁴ Ghattas K. Hillary Clinton Has No Regrets About Libya // Foreign Policy 14.04.2016. URL: <http://foreignpolicy.com>

⁵⁵ Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World // Pew Research Center 05.05.2016. URL: <http://www.people-press.org/2016/05/05/public-uncertain-divided-over-americas-place-in-the-world/> (last visited: 19.03.2016). <http://www.com/2016/04/14/hillary-clinton-has-no-regrets-about-libya/> (last visited: 19.03.2016).

“the US moment in the Middle East may be ending. ... The hardening conviction among America’s Arab and Israeli allies that the US is no longer a reliable partner in the sinuous intrigues and vicious rivalries of the Middle East is prompting speculation about a Russian comeback there. ... Russia, in these circumstances, is looking good.”⁵⁶

According to Kissinger, “the U.S. must decide for itself the role it will play in the 21st century; the Middle East will be our most immediate—and perhaps most severe—test. At question is not the strength of American arms but rather American resolve in understanding

and mastering a new world.”⁵⁷

The United States has two possible ways to respond these challenges. The first one is the economic, political and military pressure including the use of military force to those who no longer want to recognize the American superiority and monocentric world system. The second one is the try to integrate into the process and begin to develop relationships with other countries based on respect for their sovereignty and national interests.

Keywords: USA — Middle East — ISIL — Saudi Arabia — Turkey — Libya — Iraq — Syria — Kurds.

⁵⁶ Gardner D. Russia cannot replace America in the Middle East // The Financial Times. 20.11.2013. URL: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/8d4e7e10-5074-11e3-befe-00144feabdc0,Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2F8 (last visited: 28.03.2016).

⁵⁷ Kissinger H.. A Path Out of the Middle East Collapse Oct. 16, 2015. URL: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/a-path-out-of-the-middle-east-collapse-1445037513> (last visited: 19.03.2016).

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