

Question: What topics have become most important for the Russian delegation at the current UN General Assembly session in the context of anti-terrorism struggle?

Oleg Syromolotov: As before, the main thrust of our work on counter-terrorism issues at the numerous events of the regular UN General Assembly session was to increase the UN contribution to international cooperation in the efforts of states to combat terrorism, and preserve and consolidate the coordinating role of the UN as the key international venue for addressing the main issues of the global counter-terrorism agenda.

Obviously, the most urgent task of the international community in this context is to put an end to ISIS and other terrorist organisations recognised as such by the UN, including Jabhat al-Nusra, no matter how this al-Qaeda's successor rebrands itself to conceal its identity.

The resources possessed by this notorious "terrorist international" are not the only problem. Regrettably, despite all UN efforts, ISIS and, perhaps to an even greater extent, other terrorist groups continue receiving external financial, material and technical support. Terrorists are being continuously supplied with weapons, ammunition and combat hardware. We keep record of all these facts, not to mention the regular political cover provided to terrorists and extremists and the use of counter-terrorism issues to achieve cynical political and geopolitical goals. Otherwise how could ISIS withstand the regular armed forces of several states for so long?

To create conditions to fight ISIS more effectively, Russia prepared and submitted to the UN Security Council a draft resolution on imposing a comprehensive trade and economic embargo on the territory that is controlled by this terrorist group. However, our initiative met with resistance from the Western states that also oppose us regarding another draft UNSC resolution on countering terrorist ideology, as well as other our initiatives. In a sense, this is resistance, opposition to President Vladimir Putin's appeal, delivered from the UN rostrum two years ago, to establish a broad anti-terrorist front.

Regrettably, it is fairly difficult to overcome this opposition that is based on the opportunistic, short-sighted interests of some states that do not want to accept the transition to a multi-polar world. Paranoid Russophobia is gaining momentum in the UN as well, which is artificially inserted into the counter-terrorism agenda through double standards: for instance, in Syria terrorists are divided into two groups – "bad" and "not so bad." It is clear that the former will be duly punished. As for the latter, they are brazenly and artificially portrayed as "freedom fighters" or "moderate opposition members", or as "violent extremists" more recently, to shield them from criminal prosecution, apparently in order to use them later for some future political or geopolitical designs against arbitrarily designated "objectionable regimes," among other reasons. We have many questions as regards the Western conception of "opposing violent extremism" that, under certain circumstances, fully allows for interference in the domestic affairs of other states and justifies actions of terrorists and extremists as a "struggle against repressive and authoritarian regimes."

Since we cannot unite politically to fight terrorism in these conditions, and new initiatives are blocked, we consider it important to thoroughly monitor the observance by states of their commitments under the adopted UN Security Council's counter-terrorism resolutions. These resolutions constitute a uniform international standard for counter-terrorism efforts of states, and we must keep a watchful eye to ensure strict observance if we want to live in a more or less safe world. At Russia's proposal, the UN Security Council will devote a special meeting to this issue.

By raising such issues, Russia is not seeking to selfishly benefit itself alone. What we are doing is in the interests of the entire international community.

Regarding your question I have to mention one more very important event. Recently, Russia's representative Vladimir Voronkov was appointed to the high position of Under Secretary General of the UN Counter-Terrorism Office. We consider this as recognition of Russia's role in UN counter-terrorism efforts and the validity of our assessments of existing threats and how to neutralise them.

Question: What are the chances the UN will adopt a document to combat the financing of terrorism? Who is opposed and why?

Oleg Syromolotov: I do not fully understand the dramatic tone of your question. Speaking about fighting the financing of terrorism, there is a solid and sufficiently effective international legal framework within the UN. The UN first regulated the issue comprehensively in 1999 by adopting a core universal treaty – the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (ICSFT) at the General Assembly. The ICSFT establishes the fundamental obligations of the participating countries to ensure that terrorism-related financial flows are reliably disrupted. The key points are making the financing of terrorism a criminal offence; effective international cooperation in combating the financial support of terrorists, including legal assistance, and the extradition of perpetrators; the freezing and confiscation of terrorist assets, and so on. Russia signed the Convention in 2000.

Significant work is also being carried out through the UN Security Council. In 2001, the Security Council adopted a fundamental anti-terrorist resolution 1373, which called for members to introduce tough policies to impede and interdict terrorists and their financial resources. On Russia's initiative, that resolution was the first to establish a close connection between international terrorism and transnational crime, illicit trafficking of drugs, weapons and WMD materials, money-laundering and other criminal challenges and threats.

Russia continues to take steps to strengthen the international regime to combat the financial component of terrorism. Recently, considerable progress has been made in this direction. In early 2015, Russia initiated a statement by the UN Security Council president on preventing terrorists from receiving oil revenues, and then Security Council Resolution 2199, aimed at preventing the financing of terrorists through illegal trade in oil and oil products, precious metals and cultural objects. The importance and timeliness of these documents in undermining the resource base of ISIS and other militant groups in Iraq and Syria cannot be overestimated – the blow was targeted with utmost precision.

In December 2015, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2253, drafted cooperatively by Russia and the United States and covering the most pressing tasks in fighting the activities and financing of ISIS, Al-Qaeda and associated individuals and groups.

I have already talked about the Russian draft resolution on the introduction of a comprehensive trade and economic embargo against the territories controlled by ISIS. Although this document was not adopted, we have managed to include a number of its elements in UNSC Resolution 2368 approved on July 20 – in particular, calling on governments to cut off any trade, economic and financial contacts with ISIS, Al-Qaeda and associated individuals, groups, firms and companies, including by intensifying border security efforts. Subsequently, a similar provision was included in Resolution 2370 of August 2, 2017, preventing

weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists. We will continue to work on countering the financing of terrorism at all international platforms, including the UN Security Council and the FATF.

Question: Recently terrorists suffered heavy losses in Syria, in particular, the breaking of the siege of Deir ez-Zor, a city of strategic importance. In light of this, are there plans to further reduce Russian forces in Syria or even completely end the Russian operation in that country?

Oleg Syromolotov: Indeed, over the last few months, the Syrian government forces, supported by the Russian Aerospace Forces, made significant progress fighting armed terrorist groups. You are right that the Syrian air base near Deir ez-Zor has been rescued and Syrian army units have crossed the Euphrates. The tactical situation is facilitating the effort to completely obliterate ISIS in the area. With our support, Syrian troops are working on successful offensives in other directions as well, in spite of unpleasant surprises, such as military provocations from positions controlled by armed groups sponsored by the US and its allies.

The de-escalation zones, coordinated in Astana, started operating recently. At the international meeting on Syria, which took place in Astana in September, Russia, Turkey and Iran, as guarantors of the ceasefire regime, announced the creation of four de-escalation zones in southwest Syria, eastern Ghouta, the north of Homs province and Idlib province, in accordance with the memorandum of May 4, 2017. There is reason to hope that together we will continue to work toward further easing the situation, notwithstanding tricks by the turncoat terrorist group of Jabhat al-Nusra. I would not be surprised to find hijabs among their supply of clothes, in addition to those worn by paramedics and doctors as well as White Helmet rescuers. Recently the group got a real thrashing near Idlib in response to their dirty raid against the Syrian army and our military police platoon.

We consider our main achievement in these challenging circumstances to be the considerable drop in the level of violence in Syria. The humanitarian situation started to improve gradually with the launch of the de-escalation zones. Russia consistently renders humanitarian assistance to affected Syrian communities and makes active efforts to involve the international community in restoring peaceful life in Syria. I cannot say the same about the US and its charges. For example, we can see the humanitarian disaster taking place in Raqqa (before that in Mosul), due to the lack of urgent and effective measures to deliver humanitarian supplies and create corridors for evacuating civilians, not to mention the numerous persistent mistakes by US aircraft, including airstrikes hitting civilian infrastructure.

I would like to specially note that the ceasefire regime and de-escalation process do not apply in the least to ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and their terrorist allies. The relentless fight against them will continue until Syria is fully liberated from the terrorist scourge. We cannot stop halfway, so Russian troops will provide further assistance to the Syrian army to eliminate terrorists. Accordingly, the quality and quantity of the Russian troops in Syria will continue to be determined by the tactical missions assigned to our armed forces.

Question: The fight against cyber terrorism is becoming increasingly urgent today. At the meeting in Hamburg the presidents of Russia and the United States agreed on dialogue to establish a bilateral working group on cyber security. What has been done in this respect? Will this working group be set up? Or does this no longer make sense considering the deterioration of bilateral relations?

Oleg Syromolotov: As for the use of information and communication technology (ICT), such as the

internet, by terrorists, we are watching developments in this area with growing concern. The problem is that this menace is just part of the overall package of threats in the field of international information security (IIS). Apart from cyber terrorism, it includes the use of ICT for military-political and criminal purposes. All these challenges are so closely intertwined that we look at them as a triad rather than its individual components.

Regrettably, today ICT has become all but the main instrument of military-political pressure, interference in the internal affairs of other countries and violation of the rights and freedoms of their citizens. Even information crime is often used as a cover-up for implementing political goals. As for mercenary attacks by hackers, they inflict tremendous damage on the world economy almost daily.

I would like to note that Russia was the first country to voice the need to counter these criminal and aggressive manifestations in the international arena. We have been putting forward relevant initiatives at the UN for almost 20 years now. For instance, since 1998 Russia has initiated the adoption of the annual resolution on IIS by the UN General Assembly, which launches the work of the main IIS negotiating track in the UN – the relevant expert group.

Unfortunately, the negotiating process is not smooth at this venue, either. Nonetheless, we remain confident in the potential advance along this road. The international community should denounce the existing threats in IIS and focus on a search for specific solutions.

We believe the elaboration and adoption by the UN of universal rules for the conduct of states in the information space will be the most effective answer to the entire range of threats in this area. Such rules should be aimed at preventing conflicts and confrontation in the information space, and the assertion in the digital area of the principles of the non-use of force, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states and respect for their sovereignty, and observance of human rights.

Obviously, any multilateral efforts in this area should be supplemented by bilateral dialogue. We are open for cooperation with any interested states. The United States as well as Russia is certainly a heavyweight in ICT. In this case dialogue is always better than clashes or an exchange of accusations. I hope the US side understands this as well.

We are ready for dialogue with the Americans on this issue. We have already accumulated positive experience in this area. Cooperation will be resumed as soon as Washington is ready for it. We have made relevant proposals to the Americans more than once and believe the ball is in the US court.

Question: Do Russia and the United States maintain full-scale contacts on countering terrorism in Syria? Is there a threat that they will be frozen or reduced? Are any meetings in this format planned in the near future? If so, at what level are they planned?

Oleg Syromolotov: The Syrian issue is in the permanent focus of attention in Russian-US diplomatic and military contacts. We emphasise our interest in real coordination of actions with the US in countering terrorism in that country. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov regularly raises the issues related to settlement in Syria during his telephone conversations and meetings with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson. Visiting the UN General Assembly during the high-level week, Mr Lavrov met with Mr Tillerson twice – on September 17 and September 19. I think this answers the question of whether there is a risk that these contacts will be frozen or reduced.

Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Syromolotov's interview with RIA Novosti, September 29, 2017

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We continue work and expert cooperation at the international venues where Syrian settlement is discussed. This applies to the Geneva process. Our military experts also maintain dialogue. For example, the command of the Russian forces in Syria warned US partners via a special channel about the scale and boundaries of a military operation against ISIS in Deir ez-Zor. A trilateral Russia-US-Jordan monitoring centre on the functioning of the third de-escalation zone in the south of Syria has been working in Amman since August.