

ANTI-IS COALITION TAKES SHAPES DESPITE HUGE NUMBER OF UNCERTAINTIES ON THE GROUND

By André Burstin

According to a statement issued by the press service of the Elysée Palace, French fighter jets carried out their first air strikes against Islamic State (IS – referred as “Daech”) positions in northern Iraq, early in the morning on Friday September 19. French media sources later reported that the operation was conducted by at least two Rafale aircrafts stationed in the Al Dhafra Air Base, near Abu Dhabi.

The target has been described as a “logistical center”, which was “totally destroyed” in the air strike. The previous day, French President François Hollande had declared during a press conference that he had decided to “respond to the request of the Iraqi authorities to offer aerial support”. Earlier in the week, it was reported that French aerial forces had carried reconnaissance flights over the Iraqi territory.

The French announcements received a warm welcome from Washington, as the White House expressed its eagerness to coordinate with its “French partners” in the coming days. President Obama’s press secretary Josh Earnest declared at a briefing held on Thursday that Paris’ military involvement in Iraq would bring a “significant contribution to the ongoing combat with the Islamic State.”

Until now, French actions had been focused on sending weapons and humanitarian assistance to the Yazidi population and Kurdish Peshmergas fighting the Jihadi advance. Following François Hollande’s decision, France has however made a big step forward by becoming the second Western country to participate effectively in the aerial campaign, although president Hollande made clear that he would not send ground troops and that the sphere of the French military operation would not extend to Syria.

These reactions are in line with the U.S. administration’s determination of building the global coalition which was shaped on Monday September 15 during conferences in Jeddah and Paris. On this occasion, nearly 40 countries, promised to support anti-

terrorist efforts by using “whatever means necessary” to fight IS, including military action. This international mobilization, which materialized with the French air strikes, certainly played an important role in convincing the U.S. Senate to approve President Obama’s plan to equip and trained “moderate” Syrian rebels.

Considering the course of events since Monday September 15, it is very likely that the members of the “core coalition” hailed by U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel during the latest NATO summit “Wales 2014” will now accelerate their military buildup, although many voices have expresses doubts about the long term effectiveness of the aerial warfare in the present context.

First, there is a real risk that Jihadi fighters could adapt their strategy by intermingling with the civilian population and waging guerilla warfare. Moreover, it can be feared that terrorists trained in the use of sophisticated weapons systems could demonstrate capabilities acquired in the past on other battlefields, such as Northern Caucasus. Lastly, IS is said to have constructed several bunkers in areas under its control, such as the Syrian city of Raqqa.

Meanwhile, a coordinate Western military action might also fuel terrorism in American, European and Australian cities, as have shown the dismantling of IS’ cells in Australia on Thursday September 16. It is also worth mentioning that six suspected IS members were arrested the previous Tuesday in the framework on an anti-terrorist operation carried out near Lyon at the request of Counter-terrorism Section of the Public Prosecution Service in Paris.

Apart of the risk of homegrown terrorism, we must lastly report fears that IS could use Russian military airplanes seized from Raqqa’s Tabaqa Airbase to carry out suicide attacks modelled on September 11, 2001. According to the Kuwaiti daily newspaper Alseyassah, the terrorist organization is seeking to recruit mercenary pilots and technicians in order to train its fighters on these aircrafts.

Given all these elements, it will be essential to monitor the effective initiatives that will be taken by the Muslim countries that have pledged support to the U.S.-led coalition. Despite the fundamental nature of the French contribution, the role, although largely symbolic, of Sunni nations will indeed be determinant to avoid military operations in Iraq to be considered as a new “western crusade” against the Arab world.

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