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SYRIAN STUDIES AT THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES (THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES OF RAS)

The Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IOS RAS), one of the leading research centers in the world with a two-hundred-year history, conducts serious research on the Middle East issues. The Institute carries out fruitful and multilateral activities for the development of Russian Oriental studies, and its fundamental works have won recognition in the international scientific and expert community.

The interdisciplinary studies on Arab countries conducted at the Institute are of particular relevance and importance given the military-political and socio-economic turbulence in the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the fundamental geopolitical changes in the region associated with the so-called Arab Spring.

The Syrian Arab Republic is a "hub" of contradictions and an arena of conflict of interests of various political forces; it is here that a serious military confrontation is going on over the past 7 years. In this context the Syrian issue is of particular interest to scientists from the IOS RAS, as evidenced by numerous works devoted to that country. In addition to purely scientific significance, the studies of Russian Orientalists-Arabists are of practical importance also for the development of the strategy of interaction between Russia and the countries of the region.

Key words: *the Institute of Oriental Studies, the Middle East, Arab countries, Syria, international relations, conflict resolution.*

The Institute of Oriental Studies, founded in Saint-Petersburg in 1818 as the the Asiatic Museum under the Imperial Academy of Sciences, at the beginning of the XX century became known as the largest center for the study of the East because of the works of Russian scientists-orientalists, who specialized in history, archaeology, culture, religion, ethnography, linguistics and literary criticism of the East.

Its present name the Institute received in 1930 after a reorganization which fused the Asiatic Museum with the Turkology Group and the Institute of Bud-

dhist Culture and into a brand new research center. Since 1950, the Institute of Oriental Studies is located in Moscow. Guided by the principles of internationalism, the right of peoples to self-determination, the Soviet leadership sought to develop multilateral relations with the countries of the East and made efforts to enlist the support of the Middle East countries for its foreign policy in the international arena.

In the 1970s, the Institute of Oriental Studies focused on the study of socio-political processes in Africa and Asia, including Arab countries. In 1980-2000, the focus was on the foreign policy sphere, many works were devoted to the interstate relations in the region, as well as Moscow's relations with the Middle East countries, which was important for establishing fruitful cooperation in bilateral and multilateral formats.

As for the St. Petersburg branch, since 2007 it began to function as a separate Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences called the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of RAS (1).

To date, the studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies cover the whole range of Oriental issues. The study area extends from the West coast of North Africa, up to the Pacific Islands (1). A chronology of research covers all major periods of the history of the East, from ancient times to the present day.

The Institute of Oriental Studies publishes 18 periodicals including "Journal of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS," "Works of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS," "Asia and Africa today," "Eastern Analytical studies," "The Oriental Archive" and others.

As for the Syrian issue, the specialists of the Institute are particularly interested in both the political processes taking place in the country and the economic, social and cultural aspects of the development of Syria, taking into account the centuries-old ties between the two countries and the established close cooperation since the Soviet times. A significant contribution in this direction has been made by Primakov E. M., Director of the Institute of Oriental studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1977-1985 [35].

The Syrian issues are addressed not only in scientific monographs and periodicals of the IOS RAS, numerous round tables, seminars, conferences, etc. are held on this topic, especially on the Syrian crisis settlement [24].

In 2004, the Institute of Oriental Studies published a book by Yurchenko V.P. dedicated to the problems of national security of Syria [39]. It highlighted the role of the army in the emerging concept of "defensive sufficiency," which influenced the adoption in Damascus of foreign policy various decisions concerning Israel.

Hussein Khaled's work "Syria: socio-political development in 1963-1993" analyzed the process of making major political decisions taking into account the changes in the region and in the system of international relations at that time [20].

Orientalist Akhmedov V.M. [1] of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS should be specially noted for his significant contribution to the study of modern

Syria. In his works, he examines the politics and power of the modern Syrian Arab Republic, especially the development of the country under President Bashar al-Assad through the prism of regional modernization policy, as well as refers to the theme of the Syrian opposition movement in recent years.

A special place among the Arabists, engaged in the Syrian studies, belongs to the famous scientist Philonik A.O., who for several decades has been subjecting economic development of the Syrian Arab Republic to a thorough analysis and identified problems and promising areas for cooperation between Russia and Syria [15].

The issue of cooperation between Russia and Syria as well as Russia's position on the conflict in Syria was highlighted in the works of the famous Russian orientalist Zvyagelskaya I.D. [30]. It is also necessary to note the valuable works to Syrian problems by Professor Naumkin V.V., Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Academician of RAS, Doctor of Historical Sciences [8].

It is quite natural that in recent years, the researchers and experts focused on the Syrian crisis, which developed in the context of the Arab Spring. According to the experts from the Institute of Oriental Studies, the impact of the crisis crossed the national framework and reached the regional and global level, it revealed the clash of interests among the regional and global players in this Arab country and in the region as a whole, which in turn played an important role in prolonging the conflict for many years. The support by external actors of the existing armed Syrian opposition, represented by Islamic groups, stimulated the formation of a large hearth of radical Islamism in Syria. According to the experts of the Institute of Oriental Studies, it has contributed in general to the creation of numerous terrorist groups and their expansion in the region. The role and place of Islamism in the protracted war in Syria, which continues from 2011 to the present day, is analyzed in the works of Dolgov B.V. [9. P. 103-125]. The policy of the Syrian Republic in the Middle East region in different periods is studied in the works by Filonik A.O., Kosach G.G., Melkumyan E.S., Plotnikov N.D., Isaev V.A. and Krupyanko M.I. [18; 23; 28; 29; 19; 22. P. 184-204; 25].

At the Center for the study of the Middle East of the Institute of Oriental Studies, specialists in Iran conduct research on the current political and economic situation of Iran, on the specifics of the current situation of Iran in the international arena. The Iranists confirm the long-standing allied ties between Syria and Iran since the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988 [36].

The weakening of Iran, as well as the minimization of its influence in Iraq and in the region as a whole, are the strategic goals of the second bloc countries, primarily the US and Israel.

Special attention should be paid to the problem of the use of chemical weapons in the course of military actions that began in Syria in 2011. That issue has exacerbated the confrontation both within the country and in the international arena. After the events of August 21, 2013, when, according to the US intel-

ligence, due to the use of chemical weapons by government troops more than 1.4 thousand people were killed, the countries of the second block began to accuse the official Damascus and more often began to voice the demand for the immediate withdrawal of the current President of Syria. However, according to experts, there were great doubts about the use of chemical weapons and some accused Islamists of chemical attack. Basically, the comments of the experts of the Institute coincided with the official position of the Russian Federation [14]. They stressed the need to transfer the entire Syrian stock of chemical weapons to international structures to avoid further provocations. However, despite Syria's consent to the transfer of chemical weapons with the help of active mediation of the Russian Federation, further, there were new chemical attacks in the country, and the US and its allies accused the Syrian government and, to some extent, Russia again. Experts point out that the goals of the above-mentioned blocs of countries in the Syrian conflict, as well as of the Middle East politics as a whole, are diametrically opposite. In addition, the Syrian crisis reveals the growing global confrontation between Russia and the United States along with their allies [27].

Today, there are many anti-government groups in Syria. Experts of the Institute of Oriental Studies contribute to the formation of an appropriate Russian strategy in this conflict, aimed at improving cooperation between the countries and reducing the threat of future armed clashes [13. P. 225-227]. It is noted in their works that the war in Syria supported and inspired by foreign countries gradually comes to an end. The only legitimate Syrian government controls most of the country. The Syrian opposition controls separate, unrelated parts of the Syrian land. After the restoration of control by the Syrian leadership over the entire territory of the country, the question of relations between Damascus and the countries that supported and unleashed international intervention against the Syrian people will arise, as well as the question about the relationship between Iran and Russia with the countries that sponsored and supported the intervention against sovereign Syria.

We believe that a "new" Middle East is being formed before our eyes, many countries of the world will have to accept this reality, thereby changing the policy towards Russia, Iran and Syria. It is important to support groups that resist Saudi aggression in Yemen. It is important to strengthen military and political cooperation with Libya and Egypt. It is also important to resist nationalism in Syria, Iraq and Iran.

An important place among the works published by IOS RAS is the work by Pir-Budagova E.P. "History of Syria. The XX century" [34]. The monograph analyzes the historical development of the Syrian Arab Republic, which took place during the XX century, since the Ottoman period and reaching the 90s.

An important issue is the assessment of the negative consequences of the war in the cultural and humanitarian sphere, the problem of preserving the historical and cultural heritage in the zones of conflicts and wars, including Syria. Thus,

the album edited by Plotnikov N.D. and prepared by IOS RAS in 2016 under the title “Syria: a tragedy without a statute of limitations” is of great interest, it contains photographs of Syrian objects of cultural and historical heritage before and after their damage during the fighting. The book also attempts to assess the possibilities of restoration of these monuments.

Thus, the great role of the Institute of Oriental Studies in the development of both Russian and world science, as well as in building the strategy and tactics of foreign policy of the Russian Federation in the Middle East and North Africa, are proved by the results of many years of activities of talented Orientalists working in that scientific center. Fruitful work carried out by them in different areas of Oriental studies and covering different periods of human development, confirm the right of the Institute to be considered one of the best centers in the history of world Oriental studies. The special interest of the Institute’s specialists in Syria, which resulted in numerous works devoted to this country, contribute to an adequate perception of its history and culture, which in turn is a necessity for the development of optimal policy in relation to the settlement of the Syrian conflict, given the complex circumstances of the international level.

NOTES:

(1) Official site of the Institute of Oriental Studies RAS. Access mode: <http://ivran.ru/about-institute/history>.

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