Iraq: Armed Islamists are Approaching Baghdad

According to the reports coming from Iraq, militants from the extremist organization "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) are rapidly approaching Baghdad. Early in the morning on June 12 the Islamists have entered the city of Samarra, which is located some 120 kilometers from the Iraqi capital. By noon, they were only 90 kilometers away from Baghdad. An official ISIS website published a video message of the official spokesperson of the ISIS, Abu Muhammad al-Adnan. He was calling on all of the supporters of the ISIS to move forward and capture Baghdad and Karbala (a city with a number Shiite shrines some 110 kilometers south of the capital).

By noon, on June 12 the ISIS units controlled about 50,000 square kilometers or 15% of the country's territory that houses 4.5 million inhabitants, which amounts to 12% of the total population of Iraq. Islamists also took control of the main crossing from Iraq to Syria. In their attacks the militants are using up to 260 new armored vehicles of different types that they have taken from the Iraqi army. In this situation, the Iraqi government started distributing weapons to civilians in special centers and are asking people to come and take it.

The positions of the Iraqi army are severely compromised, and the possible fall of Samarra may as well cast the final blow to the Iraqi military, since this city — is the only remaining fortified position on the road to Baghdad from the north. Behind it there's nothing but roadblocks, many of which have already been abandoned by soldiers and police officers. To make the matters even worse the Islamists have seized an airbase with a number of aircraft remaining intact and some pilots agreed to join the ISIS along with a couple hundreds of officers and soldiers. Tens of thousands of others changed their uniform to civilian clothes and fled together with refugees to Kurdistan.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has once again announced that he is going to put an end to the ISIS and all those deserters that have fled Mosul leaving the city to Islamists. But then it became known that Washington is not going to provide military assistance to the Iraqi government by re-deploying troops from Afghanistan or sending drones there. All the White House authorities could come up with was a promise to provide $ 1 billion in financial assistance "to facilitate the fight against terrorism." The New York Times has published an article which describes the attempts made by Nouri al-Maliki to get the US assistance in fighting the ISIS back in May, before they started capturing Iraqi cities. Iraqi Prime Minister proposed to level the ISIS camps with air strikes but Washington refused him help out of fear that this could draw the US into yet another protracted armed conflict.

So far, the only force that is able to resist the Islamist attacks in Iraq are the Kurdish armed forces. According to the "Shafaq News" media outlet, the Kurdish aviation has started patrolling the Kurdistan airspace, while the Peshmerga (armed Kurdish militants) and the police are fortifying the border area between Kirkuk and Nineveh, in order to be able to track the movements of the ISIS troops. Kurdish media have also reported the concentration of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in the city of El Huveydzha. These moves are designed to protect the borders of the so-called "disputed territories", including the city of Kirkuk and the Kirkuk oil field, the right for control over which has been contested by Baghdad and Erbil. Iraqi parliament speaker Osama al-Nujaifi announced that the Prime Minister of Kurdistan Masoud Barzani has expressed his readiness to support the Iraqi armed forces in their fight against Islamists in Ninewa, but only when they would get a request from Baghdad, the latter has been announcing that it would "deal with the situation on its own" despite massive desertion rates in Iraqi troops. Nouri al-Maliki fears that the Kurds will demand the right to control the Kirkuk oil field area in exchange for their military help. Then he will
have a hard time finding sympathy with Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites alike.

Now Nouri al-Maliki is trying to solve the matter by transferring tanks and heavy artillery from the western Anbar province to stop the advance of the ISIS forces. But this step will considerably weaken the positions of the Iraqi government troops in this biggest western province, which have been unsuccessfully trying to suppress since December 2013. And then the rebels will be able to strike Now the rebels will have a chance to launch an assault against Baghdad from the west - from the city of Ramadi (110 km from the capital) and Felludzhi (60 km from the capital), which have been under control of the ISIS forces and pro-Saddam Baathists for a while now.

A number of analysts believes that the US unwillingness to help the government of Nouri al-Maliki is connected with his pro-Iranian orientation and his generally weak positions in the country. On top of all the Saudi Arabia lobby is second largest in the US after the Israeli one, and Riyadh has already made a number of efforts to see Nouri al-Maliki go along with his supporters. A Shiite government in Baghdad — is a bone in the throat for Saudi Arabia, given all the hatred it shows to Tehran and out of fear of a Shiite arc creation, stretching from Iran to Lebanon. We can not also exclude the fact that the White House could have been behind all of this from the very beginning, while planning to provoke the disintegration of Iraq into three entities - Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish. After all, small states are easier to manage. The creation of a radical quasi-state of Sunnitstan at the very Syrian border and consequent fall of Nouri al-Maliki, would put Assad in a tough spot, reviving the US plans of overthrowing the legitimate government in Damascus. Apparently while realizing this, Tehran has recently announced it would be sending special forces to protect Baghdad in case it will be besieged.

The situation is far from being clear but the ease with which the ISIS troops are advancing across the Iraq is alarming. Especially when one is to consider the fact that in addition to the regular financial assistance Saudi Arabia and Qatar are providing to them, they have captured some 430 million dollars in one of the Mosul banks. Should the rebels reach Baghdad and begin an assault of the capital from the outside and inside with terrorists that had previously infiltrated the city – the outcome will be disastrous. In this case, Nouri al-Maliki and his entourage will flee abroad, since he will not find a lot of sympathy on the South which is mainly populated by Shiites, the latter are favoring Muqtada al-Sad and other political figures. At the end of the day – nobody likes losers. And it seems that Nouri al-Maliki understands that perfectly well, since he's been trying to mobilize the army, police, security forces and armed militia in order to repel the Islamic States of Iraq and Syria and its allies.

But no matter what the outcome is, the rule of the regime that was imposed by the White House is on its last legs, the changes are in the air.

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