Saudi Arabia is fueling the war in Iraq

The louder the al-Maliki government makes claims about the success of his army in repelling the attacks of the ISIS militants and even retaking territory in a number of areas, the worse the situation in Iraq becomes. On June 26, Baghdad reported that in Tikrit, helicopters landed troops of several military men who allegedly liberated the city. As it became evident the following day, they in fact were only able to capture a few buildings, but were then surrounded by Sunni insurgents. Troops had to be evacuated. On the morning of June 27, the Arab media reported the liberation of the refinery at Baiji by government forces. But later it turned out that the fighting was on-going and that the refinery remains in the hands of Sunni insurgents from local tribes. It was confirmed that 300 U.S. military advisers are already taking part in military operations as "consultants" with commanders of Iraqi units. But this is of little help, and in some areas of the ISIS troops and Sunni militants are at a distance of 80 kilometers from Baghdad, amassing forces for a decisive assault.

It is worth nothing that, recent events have seen the Islamic radicals focusing almost exclusively on the capture of economic facilities. They have in their hands already a refinery in Baiji and a number of oil and gas fields. ISIS militants and Baathist armed militias of the Nashqbandi are not hiding in caves or the desert as did the Taliban in Afghanistan. Instead, "it increases its involvement in the illegal trade of oil and gas on the black market in the most important region of the world", said Middle East expert at Georgetown University (Washington) Paul Sullivan. Ever since the first years of its inception, this group has been associated with economic flows. ISIS militants have engaged in the interception of trucks transporting fuel and the subsequent use of the captured cargo. In addition to the oil trade, ISIS collects tribute from businessmen of Mosul and other Iraqi cities. Now, after the capture of strategic facilities, profits for the terrorists could increase substantially. At a briefing on June 24, U.S. intelligence officials estimated the income of the "Islamic State in Iraq and Syria" in the tens of millions of dollars a month. The group has also managed to capture a lot of money in banks. This allows it to expand its range of operations.

In parallel, the Sunni tribes, Nashqbandi and ISIS leadership have begun creating a system of administration in the occupied territories, preparing, obviously, for the creation in the future of their own public education system. As of now, the division of Iraq into three separate parts is a real prospect.

During John Kerry’s visit on June 24 to Baghdad, al-Maliki again made the request to Washington to provide air support for its troops. And although the U.S. State Department has assured him that America is ready to provide all necessary assistance, with the exception of re-sending combat troops again to Iraq, however, even the issue of providing air support is extremely sensitive. The point here is that the invasion of Iraq by ISIS militants should be seen as a war between Sunnis and Shiites for control over the Middle East or as a war by Saudi Arabia and its Golf Coast allies against Iran. “Such a blow to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was the long held dream of the Saudi King, Abdullah, emphasized by the famous American Middle East expert Simon Henderson in his article in the latest issue of the magazine, Foreign Affairs. He almost always considered al-Maliki to be an Iranian puppet and refused to send an ambassador to Baghdad and urged his fellow monarchies of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Oman to maintain the same of distance. In 2011 when open revolt broke out against Bashir Assad and concerns were raised in Riyadh over Iran’s nuclear program, Saudi intelligence in the form of Prince Bandar bin Sultan re-opened their coffers and started to support the more radical elements of the Sunni opposition. And although in April of this year they were clearly unhappy with the Obama administration’s careful approach, Bandar resigned and Saudi support
for the jihadists continued. So, as it turns out, the ISIS movement in Iraq seems like just the tactical surprise which Bandar dreamed of, although there is no concrete proof of this.

As for all the seriousness of the Sunni-Shiite confrontation in Iraq, it was most clearly sounded in the last statement of the press service of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki which read, Saudi Arabia is engaged in appeasing terrorists and providing material and moral support to radical groups”, and in preventing the former ambassador of Qatar to the United States, Sheikh Nasser Hamad Al Khalifa, underlined that Washington's military support of the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki will be considered throughout the Sunni community as an unfriendly act. Moreover, he continues on Twitter, “the collective military action of the West or Iran, or both, together with al-Maliki against the Sunni Arabs will be treated as a new plot”.

Judging by recent statements from Riyadh, the failure of Nouri al-Maliki has always been the sweetest dream of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Al-Maliki to him was never anything more than an Iranian puppet. Abdullah for many years refused to send an ambassador to Baghdad. After his failed policy in Syria due to organized resistance by Iran, developments in Iraq give him another chance. That prospect breaks the many predictions of political analysts and causes confusion among many “fortunetellers”. In recent weeks, the Arab press was filled with reports of the beginning - albeit reluctantly of a Golf Coast rapprochement with Iran. Evidence for this was taken from the visit of the Emir of Kuwait to the Iranian capital, Tehran, with several trade delegations from the Persian Gulf countries.

And it is always worth remembering that, roughly the Sunni-Shiite section coincides with the boundaries of the Arab and Persian world. In geopolitical terms, Iraq is the connecting link with the Shiite majority, which is Arab in origin. There is another and totally confusing dimension, which historically is the cornerstone of Saudi policy, Saudi support for Islamic radicals abroad and their containment in the Kingdom. Hence we get Saudi support of Bin Laden while he fought in Afghanistan, the jihadists in Chechnya, Bosnia and in Syria. When the 2011 revolt against Assad began, together with growing concern in Riyadh in connection with Iran’s nuclear program, Saudi intelligence again reopened its file of subversion. Saudi Arabia not only began supporting Sunni opposition groups, but supported the most radical of them.

Today it is very difficult to predict what will come out of the chaos in Iraq. At this stage, direct confrontation between Iranian and Saudi armed forces seems unlikely, despite the possible participation of the Revolutionary Guards in the Syrian and Iraqi wars. What is absolutely clear right now, to the Syrian civil war an Iraqi civil war was added. ISIS is already prepared for the naming of a new state, the Caliphate Al-Sham. Washington has to look for its own new name for this new territory and to redefine its policy in the region. Meanwhile, yesterday Washington made a statement regarding its readiness to allocate another 500 million dollars to finance the armed Syrian opposition.

Now there is no doubt as to whose side Washington is on, they on the side of Saudi Arabia and their radical Islamic allies in Syria and Iraq. And although Riyadh recently gave understanding to the fact that, although it strongly supports the preservation of the territorial integrity of Iraq, it is “against any foreign intervention and interference in the internal affairs of Iraq”. In other words, the Saudi Kingdom opposes any government assistance to al-Maliki. Instead, a statement from the Saudi side read, “we call on all people of Iraq, regardless of their religious beliefs, to unite to overcome the current difficulties”.

So, considering the clarification of Simon Henderson, King Abdullah would very much like to see ISIS march on Baghdad and put an end to the Nouri al-Maliki regime. Given the rapidly declining support of the Iraqi prime minister among the population, such a scenario is not excluded. And then, if Riyadh again negotiates with the U.S. on containing Iran, it will encourage all Sunni tribal militia groups to oppose ISIS and attempt to stabilize the situation in Iraq. The only problem in that is, there is a lack of confidence that it will come sooner than the disintegration of Iraq itself.

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