Yemen: Power has Shifted, What's Next?

At the end of September 2014 Yemen actually underwent a coup when fighters of the Shiite rebel group "Ansar Allah", under the leadership of A. Houthi, got tired of the protracted negotiations with President Hadi and the government of the "Islah" movement and took control of the country's capital Sana'a. Through not overly bloody battles, they took basic administrative and government buildings - the Council of Ministers, ministries, military barracks, the central bank, and radio and television stations. They fought against the Sunni "Islah" movement associated with the "Muslim Brotherhood" and the Salafis, as well as "Ansar al-Sharia" (a division of "al-Qaeda") and separate units of the government army. Prime Minister Mohammed Basindava announced his resignation. The rebels accused President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi of dictatorship and autocracy. The Prime Minister gave the same reason for his resignation.

The taking of Sana'a by the Shiite Houthis introduced significant changes in the balance of power in the strategically important southern part of the Arabian Peninsula. After all, this is the location of the "soft underbelly" of the largest, richest, and most powerful Arab state - Saudi Arabia, a key strategic partner of the United States in the Persian Gulf. In addition, this area is located at the intersection of important routes of world shipping from Europe to Asia via the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. Here an explosive situation has once again arisen that has already resulted in numerous military conflicts. For example, in the 60s in North Yemen there was a civil war between the monarchists and republicans, which involved Nasserian Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Then, for more than two decades the civil war continued between South (socialist) and North Yemen. Since the 90s both Shiite and Sunni radicals have raised their heads here. And in the 2000s there was an extensive structure of "al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula" (AQAP).

The backbone of the Shiite rebel forces in Yemen, which are actively supported by Tehran, including the supply of arms and military instructors, are Houthis - supporters of the Shiite Imams of the Al-Houthi family who in 2004 rebelled against the central government in Sana'a. For a long time fighting between the central government and Houthis unfolded in the mountainous region in northwest Yemen in Sa'ada province with military support for the government army from Riyadh and the United States. The current offensive in Sana'a is headed by the youngest son of the Imam - Abdul Malik al-Houthi. The Houthis accused the government of being a conductor of Wahhabism with the support of Saudi Arabia, and relies solely on the Sunni community.

In 2009, the government army launched a major offensive against the Houthis in northern Yemen, which forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes. The operation was accompanied by the Saudi armed forces, although Riyadh officially denied it. Moreover, American warplanes and drones took part in the operation, carrying out dozens of raids on their positions, which resulted in numerous casualties among the civilian population. And the United States embassy in Sana'a acted as the headquarters of dozens of CIA and Pentagon employees who coordinated the military operation against the rebels. Recently Houthis were fighting not only against the government army, but also against the radical Sunni groups of "Al-Islah", which are closely associated with the Salafis (a radical offshoot of Wahhabism).

The Houthis belong to the Shia sect of Zaidi, who make up more than 40% of the population of Yemen. They not only make up a significant part of the population of Yemen, but are also the most cohesive and tribal militant group, and
have long ruled over all of Yemen. The country lived almost a thousand years under the rule of the Zaidi imamate, which was overthrown in a revolution in 1962, when a republic was proclaimed in Yemen. Speaking against the central government, the Zaidis demanded a greater representation in the central bodies of government, which were dominated by representatives of the Sunni majority. In the summer of this year the Houthis movement, which could field up to 100 thousand fighters, launched an offensive on the capital. In late September, after Sana’a established a fragile truce brokered by the UN, the government and rebels began negotiations that led to the signing of the peace agreement. It provided for the establishment of a coalition government, which had to include representatives of the Shiite minority and the separatists of South Yemen. However, the agreement was never put into practice, president Hadi did not appoint a head of the new government.

The rapidity with which the Shiite militias took over the capital of Yemen has caused conflicting conclusions and reflections. For the fall of Sana’a, Hadi accused all political forces that selfishly destroy the unity of the country. His entourage claims that the former Head of State President Ali Abdullah Saleh has used his contacts in military circles to keep the Shiites in the city and overthrow the current regime. According to this version, Saleh hopes to exact revenge on the Sunni militants of all “Al-Islah” for the revolution of 2011, when he lost power. There are serious reasons to believe that, despite the regime change, the backbone of the repressive apparatus and the army remained loyal to the old regime. It is also possible that the capture of Sana’a by the rebels is a tactical move, preparing the return of forces ousted in the “color revolution” of 2011. Some analysts talk directly about the “unnatural alliance” of supporters of former President Saleh and Shiite Houthi rebels.

After all, Ali Abdullah Saleh was ousted in a "color revolution" in 2011, which coincided with the other revolutions of the "Arab Spring" in Tunisia and Egypt. In the same year, the United States, realizing the danger of the collapse of the Yemeni state, reached an agreement (with the participation of Saudi Arabia and the United Nations), which provided for the “voluntary” resignation of Saleh, the formation of a national unity government, and new elections in 2014. The agreement has not been fulfilled, and supporters of Saleh have retained their influence in the structures of the government and the army. Although the Houthis actively participated in the protest movement against Saleh, they have no place in the new government. Now they want their own. Houthi leader Abdel Malik al-Howes called the capture of Sana’a a victory of the revolution and said that the army supported the rebels.

However, most residents of Sana’a are extremely dissatisfied with the Houthis entering the city, who hang portraits of the Iranian Shiite leaders Khomeini and Khamenei, as well as the leader of “Hezbollah” Sheik Nasrallah. In Sana’a Houthi militia openly march through the streets under the slogan "Allahu Akbar, death to America, death to Israel".

Events in Yemen are of serious concern in neighboring Saudi Arabia, which accuses its arch-enemy - Iran - of providing financial and military support to the rebels. According to Riyadh, Tehran aims to create a foothold in the Shiite south of the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia has always regarded itself as a guarantor of stability in Yemen and as the defender of the Sunni majority.

Iran, for its part, states that it provides the Houthis with only moral support. Nevertheless it is perfectly clear that Iran is trying to divide the Middle East and create a Shiite arc from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria, while also encompassing Bahrain, Yemen, and, in the future, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, where Shiites live and where the kingdom’s main oil reserves are based. But the military operation of the United States, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Jordan has intensified the fears of Tehran that ISIL is just a Sunni tool of Washington and Riyadh, against Shiites and Iran specifically. In addition, the change of government in Sana’a strengthens Iran's position in its negotiations with the West over its nuclear program.

Yemen’s unity now threaten not only the Shiite rebels, but also Sunni radicals associated with "al-Qaeda". AQAP ("al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula") is the result of a merger of the Saudi and Yemeni branches of the organization in 2009. It is one of the main opponents to the Yemeni Houthis, is considered one of the most aggressive units of "Al-Qaeda", and is responsible for a series of terrorist attacks in Yemen and Saudi Arabia. AQAP also took an active part in the Yemeni revolution of 2011, which led to the downfall of the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Now it is difficult to make further predictions. Yemen is one of the weak links in the Arab “arc of instability”. This backward and poor country with a population of 24 million people, with diverse religious, ethnic, and tribal composition, is of crucial geopolitical importance. Religious and tribal conflicts in Yemen are difficult to overcome: the Shiites are not in fact a minority, they make up a little less than half of the inhabitants of Yemen (over 40%). In addition, there is a problem in the South. The unification of North and South Yemen (PDRY) took place over 20 years ago, it was actually the absorption of the South, which is still not reconciled with his subordinate position and seeks independence. And today, in the south of Yemen, which is home to about 2.5 million people, separatism has once
again raised its head. The capture of Sana’a by Houthis could lead to the separation of South Yemen. Therefore, it is possible that Yemen will have to go through a long period of civil strife and half-life.

In any case, what happened in Yemen is largely due to American policy in the Middle East. Namely, America has introduced Sunni radicals to the political arena in the form of "Al Qaeda" and the "Taliban", and then ISIL. Washington also supports the monarchs of the Persian Gulf, who are followers of Wahhabism, Salafism, and radical Sunni Islam, and who export "color revolutions" abroad. But it is by contributing to the support of the Sunnis and their dissemination, including against the Shiites and Iran, that the United States involuntarily closed the ranks of Shiites, who come together to oppose the Sunnis.

The paradox lies in the fact that it was Sunni radicals who killed soldiers and diplomats in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. On September 11, 2001, they also blew up the World Trade Center in New York.

While arming Sunnis in the Gulf the United States, on the contrary, has besieged Shiite Iran with sanctions, in order to deprive it of the right to develop nuclear energy. The expanded US aggression against Syria, which is led by Bashar Assad - a representative of the Alawite (Shia) Clan, is also directly linked to the fight against Shia in order to play along with the Sunni monarchies of Saudi Arabia and minute Qatar, which Americans can use again in the current oil and gas war against Russia. Riyadh has already increased the export of oil to the world market, and Qatar has increased spot LNG deliveries to the EU.

But on the war front Shiites and Sunnis are expanding, especially in Iraq, which could result in the interference of Iran there as well.

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