Escalation of Violence in Iraq - A Mistake or a Premeditated Scenario?

The triumph of Islamists in Iraq has generated a new round of the old discussions about the assumptions underlying the failure of American policy in Iraq, and about the reasons for the collapse of Washington's democratic experiment that has plunged the Iraqi state into bloody chaos. In the process of understanding these results of the Iraq democratization, the expert community has formulated a number of fundamental questions. Here are the most acute of them:

Is the crisis of leadership, breakdown of society, and escalation of violence in Iraq the result of an error or a premeditated scenario for the forced transformation of society? How is it that almost half of the country came under the rule of the jihadists? Why did government troops only begin to engage in open armed confrontation with the Islamists in 2013, when they killed the latest mayor of the city of Fallujah, and the city (the second capital of the province) was soon after captured by ISIL militants? Why has the United States, which toppled the regime and military machine of Saddam Hussein "overnight", done nothing for eight years to stop and neutralize the invading Islamists, thereby securing its success in Iraq?

If we turn to the sources of the problem, we can see that exactly ten years ago, al-Qaeda emissary Abu Musab al-Zarqawi first announced his intention to establish an Islamic state in the territory of Iraq and Syria. Then in 2004, when the entire Iraqi territory came under the complete control of the international coalition forces led by the United States, this statement by a jihadist who was unknown at the time looked so ridiculous and fantastic, that it seemed the speaker himself didn't even for a moment believe such events could possibly occur. His statement, as shown on the TV channel Al-Jazeera, was met both by the West and the Arab world as a bluff by a fanatic in the best case, who had clearly become “fixated” on the idea of recreating the caliphate. However, exactly ten years later when jihadist combat troops are already on the outskirts of Baghdad, it must be noted that his "minimum programme" to create an Islamist state has in some unthinkable way actually been implemented, in contrast to the US which has clearly failed in its attempt to build a democratic state in Iraq. Awareness of the obvious difference between the jihadists and the United States creates a feeling of complete surrealism regarding unfolding events in Iraq.

It seems incredible, but in ten years the Islamists actually succeeded in capturing the largest Iraqi province of Al-Anbar, which is equal to 1/3 of the area of the country. Moreover, most of the cities and towns in the province were seized by the Islamists in the period from 2004 to 2011, i.e. during the direct presence of the American army in Iraq.

An analysis of the policy of the US administration in Iraq shows that it has an internal logic and system. Coherence and consistency was present in all projects and activities. In particular, the policy of the United States included a wide range of objectives requiring, above all, the transformation of the inter-ethnic and inter-communal space of the country by artificially forming intra-state territorial communities on ethnic-religious grounds that were to become part of the Iraqi federation. The original plan was to create three autonomous entities: Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish.

As a rule, all three newly created federal entities were instilled with a new artificial system of checks and balances
on the basis of the distribution of the major powers and spheres of influence between two opposing political forces. This, on the one hand, imposes certain restrictions on the strengthening of both groups, and on the other - did not allow them to monopolise the sphere of power. So, in Iraqi Kurdistan the chain of command was divided mainly between the Barzani and Talabani clans. In Baghdad and surrounding Shiite provinces - power was divided between Shiites of Iranian origin and lake Arabs. In the Sunni triangle - the province of Al-Anbar - power was also divided between two local forces: clans of pro-government Sunni tribes and related Saudi clans, and Sunni tribes that however support of ISIL.

In two of the three federal entities the first step was the legalization of tribal clan militias of the Anti-Baathist opposition and their integration into the new Iraqi security structure. This was the so-called Third Force project. The essence of the project was that the members of the Kurdish and Shiite paramilitary organizations formed new special forces which were trained in American training centres intended to conduct reconnaissance and sabotage operations in the framework of implementing objectives of the counterinsurgency strategy. In Kurdistan this is the Peshmerga, in Baghdad and the southern provinces this is the paramilitary organization Badr Brigades (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and the Mahdi Army fighters.

For example, the organization Badr Brigades was actually able to obtain full control of the Interior Ministry in April 2005 when the transitional government was formed, headed by Ibrahim al-Jaafari. The United Iraqi Alliance whose main party is Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) began to play a key role in the government after its victory in parliamentary elections in January of that year. Then Bayan Jabr was appointed Minister of the Interior (April 2005 - May 2006), who former was a commander of the Badr Brigades and a senior functionary of SCIRI. Under him the commanders of the Badr Brigades took important positions in the ministry and gained considerable influence in planning counterinsurgency operations.

At the same time the fighters of the Mahdi Army, numbering 7,000 to 10,000 men at the time of its creation in June 2003, were recruited into the Iraqi security forces in the early stages of its formation in 2004. In November 2005, the Los Angeles Times, citing a senior US Armed Forces official, announced the curious fact that 90% of the 35,000-strong police officer corps, which controls the north-eastern districts of Baghdad, were part of the Mahdi Army.

As a result the situation developed so that the main power in the power block of the country was divided between these two opposing political forces. Working usually under cover or as part of the security forces, their militias ensured tight control over the population, both in urban and in rural areas. Employing terror tactics in the style of "death squads", they purged urban neighbourhoods and rural communities whose residents were suspected of involvement in the Baath. The targets of such operations were the representatives of the Sunni political, economic, intellectual, and spiritual elite, as well as those standing for the unity of the country and many of the local Shiite leaders who take anti-Iranian positions.

In the Sunni triangle (province of Al-Anbar), where the situation was somewhat different, in the process of creating a new autonomous region the Americans launched the Sahwa project. The objectives of the project are: legalisation and integration of clan-tribal militias of local Sunni tribes into the power hierarchy and power structures of the newly created territorial unit; mobilization of tribes to fight ISIL. But the paradox of the project lay in the fact that the security structure of the province integrated two opposing local forces: pro-government tribal militia and militia of kindred Saudi tribes that supported ISIL. In other words, foreign jihadists that had merged with the tribal militias of some native tribes received official status and legitimacy. So in the province a war started between the tribes and the Islamists, which ended as we know in the victory of ISIL.

The results are determined by the goals. One must note that the American Sahwa project also has its own internal logic. By 2011, when protests began in Syria, the Iraqi province of Al-Anbar bordering Syria (equal to one third of the area of the country) was already 70-80% controlled by ISIL. The province became the main base for military-terrorist Islamist expansion into Syria, and the jihadist groups based on its territory have become in a sense a geopolitical tool for the US to transform the power structure of Syrian society from within. It is possible that this contains part of the answer to the question of why for eight years Washington did not respond to the expansion of the jihadists in al-Anbar, i.e. local Sunni tribes were not given any real military assistance against ISIL.

Clearly it can be argued that the long-term domestic conflict that destroyed the integrity of the national government of Iraq is a natural result of carefully crafted US policy repeatedly tested in countries such as Afghanistan, Vietnam, El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile, Colombia, and others. The basis of this management model of a captured country is based on the principle of "divide and conquer", when the occupation authorities play on inter-communal ethnic tensions, using them to strengthen their military and political domination and transform the power structure of
society.

Alexander Saburov, Political Commentator on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".