The Kurds and the US

Some political analysts suggest that the threat of air strikes on Syria by the U.S. and some of its European partners, under the pretext of al-Assad's use of chemical weapons is related to the interest of U.S. military corporations and their intent to seize control of the exploration, production and transportation of Syria's energy resources. Recently a small exploration company from Norway discovered enormous reserves of oil and gas in Syria. There is an area rich in natural resources in a compact Kurdish Settlement in Syrian Kurdistan, where the most significant deposits in the country lie (the largest being in Rumeylan), including water. However, surgical strikes in Syria are unlikely to suddenly lead to the redrawing of the borders of the states of the Middle East and the creation of an ethnic Kurdish state in Kurdistan, which has been written about in some foreign media outlets. American politicians have repeatedly stressed that the collapse of Iraq went against the implementation of their "democratic experiment". And the overthrow of the regime of Saddam Hussein had not been undertaken to give more rights to the Kurds. Yet the idea of a "Greater Kurdistan", which is actively supported by Saudi Arabia, depends on the disintegration of Iraq into three separate states (Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish). The basis of this idea came from reports from Iraqi Kurdistan, according to which some Kurdish politicians were in favour of secession, not federalism. According to some Iranian media outlets, it fits into the long-term plans of the U.S.

Saleh Muslim, head of the Democratic Unity Party (DUP), which controls part of Syrian Kurdistan, said he doubted that Assad used chemical weapons, due to the fact that the Syrian president is under scrutiny from international observers, and in the suburbs of Damascus, UN experts are investigating an alleged use of chemical weapons. However, he noted that there are forces that actively support foreign intervention in Syria with the help of the West to militarily overthrow the current Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, who is charged with using chemical weapons.

U.S. military action may weaken the Syrian regime, further exacerbating civil conflict, as well as increasing the activity of Islamic groups. In this situation, the U.S. will seek out support from the Alawites and Kurds, who intend to keep a degree of autonomy.

As in the past, American foreign policy is directed toward economic and covert military assistance to the rebels, inciting them to overthrow or undermine the current anti-American government. In this, the rebels are used as a "means to eliminate counterproductive forces to U.S. intervention." For example, the U.S. used the Kurds as a non-state actor because they held an autonomous position in relation to the local regimes. Washington has never set itself the task of making a global solution to the Kurdish question. The Kurdish factor serves only as a means of creating conditions, whether in Iraq or Syria, to satisfy its energy needs.

Currently, the United States uses some of the Kurdish opposition in support of its regional strategic interests. For instance, it favours the National Council of Resistance (NCR), which was founded in Istanbul in 2011, bringing together not only Kurds, but also pro-Islamic forces and Arab nationalists. Supporting the policy of the West in the Syrian crisis, the political forces in the region can use the Kurds sharing the positions of the NCR and provoke them to incite a broad-based anti-government insurgency. At the same time, some politicians call on the Syrian Kurds to make a rapprochement with the West, and support the overthrow Baathist regime in order to achieve long-term autonomy. For the West and Israel it is advantageous to support the Kurds as an ethnic Kurdish state could serve as a buffer against regional threats, for instance, in containing Iran.
However, these views are not shared by the Kurds united in the Kurdish National Council (KNC), who oppose foreign intervention in Syria. This block calls for the creation of a democratic regime able to answer to Kurdish demands in the provinces of Qamishli and Afrin, where they want the right to recognize the Kurdish language as a second official language, to guarantee the rights of the Kurds in the constitution, etc.

The surgical strike capability of American missiles on government targets in Syria is unlikely to radically change this side of the ethno-political map of the Middle East. Indeed, they will only reinforce the chaos that the country is engulfed in and exacerbate the plight of the Syrian people, including the Kurds. Thousands of Syrian Kurds are crossing the Syrian-Iraqi border in order to seek refuge in Iraqi Kurdistan, causing problems for the Iraqi Kurds to support them. Supporting the aggressive plans of the U.S. and its European partners, Turkey, a NATO member, will try by all means necessary to prevent the rise of a movement on the part of Turkish Kurds. The Turkish government rejects the existence of a "Turkish Kurdistan", recently banning the use of the word "Kurdistan" in the name of a youth organization and viewing support of the Kurdistan Workers Party, led by Abdullah Öcalan, which began in March of this year a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey, as unlawful. Turkish leaders are concerned about the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of their country. In this, it pursues the same objectives as Iran.

In these complicated circumstances, the Kurds of Syria and Iraq will make every effort to preserve their gains. The plight of Syrian Kurds is provoking Iraqi and Turkish Kurds to use their armed forces to protect them. However they refuse to do this so as not to involve ethnic Kurdistan (and the entire region of West Asia) in a large-scale armed conflict. Iraqi Kurds, in particular, do not plan a military invasion of Syria, as the Syrian Kurds, in their opinion, are capable of defending themselves. However, they are willing to provide them with other forms of assistance, like taking refugees, the flow of which will only increase if the tension does not subside.

The Kurds of ethnic Kurdistan still restrain themselves in order to prevent the initiation of ethnic and religious slaughter, which could lead to their destruction as an ethnic group. They are in favour of easing international tension and holding a conference on Syria in Geneva.

Kurds doubt the Kurdish question will be solved by the European community, and even less so by the United States. They remember how Henry Kissinger, acting under the administration of R. Nixon and G. Ford, incited the 1974 Kurdish revolt, and then stopped providing assistance when it was no longer beneficial to the Americans. As a result, the Kurds suffered a severe defeat. This reinforces the distrust Kurds have of the United States and its European partners. But talk of the formation of an anti-American Kurdish underground is unfounded. Although many Kurdish organizations oppose U.S. intervention, they are interested in establishing democratic regimes that are capable of answering the demands of the Kurdish population. For example, the leaders of the organization of Iranian Kurdish Komala (the Revolutionary Workers' Party of Kurdistan) stated they would not support a war between the West and Iran, but if war did break out, the Kurdish organizations would oppose support of the ruling regime.

In general, the attacks on Syria will not benefit the Kurds, but could plunge them into a more severe and bitter struggle against Islamists.

Olga Zhigalina, Doctor of Historical Sciences, leader in the field of Kurdish studies and regional problems, chief researcher at the Centre for the study of the Middle East at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".