The Conflict in Iraq Takes a New Shape

On May 23, the Iraqi government army and militias supported by the Iraqi Air Force and the aviation of the US-led coalition began an operation to liberate the city of Fallujah (50 km to the West of Baghdad) in the Anbar Province from IS militants. In the first days of the offensive, several villages on the outskirts of Fallujah were liberated and the city was encircled. The troops occupied a large part of the city suburbs and are now close to the center, where the main extremist forces are positioned. IS combatants responded with counterattacks using mined armored cars and SUVs, which halted the rate of the advancement of government forces. In addition, the militants were using residents as "human shields" when defending their positions. In general, despite the triumphant reports from Baghdad, the success of the Iraqi army should not be overestimated. It is already clear that the military operation of Iraqi government forces to liberate the city of Fallujah from the IS terrorist groups, which Baghdad officially announced to start on May 23 this year, is being delayed. This was stated by the official representative of the Iraqi Government, Saad al-Hadithi: "The liberation of Fallujah has been delayed because of the authorities' intention to ensure the full safety of the inhabitants of the city". According to him, "the safety of civilians is the Government’s priority". The statement by the representative of the Iraqi leadership came after the messages of IS redeployment from the outskirts to central Fallujah to intensify their defensive position. The extremists forced the inhabitants of the suburbs to the same districts to use them as "human shields" during the offensive led by the government forces. In addition, there is little coordination between the Sunnis and Shiites closing in on IS, and there is a real possibility to relive the case of the Tikrit incident, where the Shiites just went on slaughtering and plundering the Sunni population. In this regard, it is quite clear that the almost entire male population of Fallujah will rise to defend the city. And it will far exceed the twenty thousand-strong government forces advancing to the city.

Moreover, Fallujah is the birthplace of the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the Iraqi IS bastion. During the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, this city showed the fiercest and most intelligent resistance, and it took more than a week to gain control even with the use of heavy equipment, aviation and artillery, and despite the fact that it was stormed by the elite forces of the US Army.

A year ago, the Iraqi army already attempted to storm the stronghold of the IS, but was surrounded on the outskirts and, suffering heavy losses, was forced to retreat. American experts say that Fallujah is the center of the planning and implementation of large-scale terrorist attacks in Baghdad against Shiite targets. In any case, even without this IS stronghold, Baghdad has a significant Sunni underground that is independent from Fallujah, which of course relies on the local Sunni population and coordinates its actions with Mosul. The capture of Fallujah will not change this situation in any way, for better or worse.

Against the backdrop of such developments it is no coincidence that the siege of Fallujah, as stated by the command of the Iraqi army, reached the "second stage" in the beginning of June. In late May, the Iraqi army cleared all the settlements in the close perimeter to the city and is now positioned on the outskirts of the city. However, the most important problem right now is how to avoid direct military clashes on the streets of Fallujah between two formally allied forces: the Sunnis, who blocked the city from the south, and the Shiites, advancing from the north. Therefore, the Americans are exerting strong pressure on Baghdad, trying to convince it that the Shiites should be only engaged in the blockade of the city and should not participate directly in the assault and street fights. Out of the
groups of the 20 thousand-strong Iraqi army forces to be directly involved in the assault to retake the city only 4 thousand military are Sunnis. This may be insufficient. The city, in addition to its IS active supporters, still has about 100 thousand inhabitants whose sympathies clearly lie on the side of the defenders. The statements made by the Americans that they are not supporting the Shia militia in the Fallujah operation, are most likely to be an acknowledgement of the secret consultations between the Iraqi military and local Sunni clans on the conditions of peaceful surrender. Their results will be clear following the advancement of Iraqi government forces deep into the city.

The problem of the Shiite participation in the assault on Fallujah lies in the fact that without the Shiite militia it is unrealistic to retake this town, or any other bastions of the IS, while the participation of Shiites in the offensive will unite the local Sunni population under the IS flag even more.

In the recent months, the Iraqi army has repeatedly shown its weakness. So, the "liberation" of Ramadi actually meant the transfer of control of the city to local tribal militias in return for allowing the government troops to hang the flag of the Iraqi state in the city centre square. After that, the army could only slightly advance to the Jordanian border, taking control of a small town Rutha in Anbar Province and seizing one Traybil crossing on the Jordanian-Iraqi border. All of these "successes" have been achieved without the participation of the Shiite paramilitary militia, which confirms the doubts about the government army’s ability to independently carry out large military offensives.

Characteristically, the news has recently broken out about the secret consultations with the Sunni tribal elite of Fallujah on reaching a compromise on the issue of the city’s surrender. Apparently, it will happen similarly to Ramadi: the flag on the central square and the transfer of administration to the local tribal leaders with a minimum involvement of the central authorities. Perhaps this is, to some extent, a sign of the beginning of the process of conditional reconciliation between Shiites and Sunnis as part of the attempts to establish a balance of power in the country on the main Sunni-Shiite axis of conflict. Only this can ensure the cessation of the civil war in Iraq. It seems like some progress has been achieved. At least, according to the commander of the operation, General Abdel Wahhab al-Saidi who reported that on May 30 the Iraqi army and militia units entered the central part of the city of Fallujah. In an interview with local television station "Al Sumar" he noted that there has been significant progress, but the extremists are still holding the resistance. Although we must not forget that such triumphant remarks are common practice for the Iraqi generals: substituting their wishful thinking for reality.

But one cannot dismiss that the Iraqi military has actually managed to reach agreement with the local clans on the conditions of honorable surrender of the city following the example of Ramadi. In this case, Fallujah will remain practically untouched, and Baghdad will get another diplomatic victory, which is crucial for the Iraqi Prime Minister Khalid Al-Abadi from a political point of view, considering the continuous pressure put on him by the well-known Shiite leader M. al-Sadr, who has been behind all the protests and riots against the current government in the "green zone" of Baghdad. And this is a much more important issue for Prime Minister Khalid Al-Abadi, than all the territories under IS control combined.

The internal crisis in Iraq’s Shiite community is a serious concern for Khalid Al-Abadi, especially when taking into account the wide infiltration of M. al-Sadr supporters into the security services and the police. This has long been communicated by the Americans who have recognized that any coordination with the Iraqi security and intelligence services has become impossible. Khalid Al-Abadi no longer trusts the country’s security forces and has recently replaced the commandant of the Baghdad "green zone" Mohammed Ridha, whom he accused of giving free pass to supporters of al-Sadr to organise riots in this area. The Iraqi Prime Minister even replaced the head of his own security service, which simultaneously performs the most delicate assignments in the field of security and intelligence. The new head is the Kurdish general Fadel Bruari, who is considered a trusted person of the son of the Kurdish autonomy president Massoud Barzani and the head of the Iraqi Kurdistan National Security Council Masroor. The personal security service is mainly provided by Kurds. This is remarkable and indicates that the support base of Khalid Al-Abadi among the Shiite elite is shrinking. Furthermore, it supports the general anti-Iranian trend of the Iraqi Prime Minister, who believes that Tehran was behind the recent unrest in the "green zone" of the capital, notwithstanding the fact that initially conflicts were within the Shiite elite itself. Yet in Iran these protests were viewed positively. In this regard, we can foresee a formation of an anti-Iranian alliance between Massoud Barzani and Khalid Al-Abadi. Both are experiencing ever-growing pressure from the pro-Iranian proteges: Al-Abadi - from al-Sadr given the apparent neutrality of the main Iraqi Shiite spiritual leader Ayatollah al-Sistani.

So the Iraqi conflict is beginning to take a new shape with little prospect of seeing light at the end of the tunnel.

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