Iraq’s trials and tribulations

Despite attempts from the Nouri al-Maliki government to stabilise the situation in Iraq – by both violently cracking down on the insurgents within Sunnite terrorist groups and armed groups of former Baathists as well as flirting with the leadership of the tribes in central and western Iraq – the circumstances within the country remain extremely tense and continue on their downward spiral, heading straight for a full-scale civil war, as it happened in 2006-2007. Meanwhile, factors of an external nature are increasingly affecting Iraq’s internal situation – from the devastating effects of the continuing war in neighbouring Syria to the direct involvement from a host of nations in the region, predominantly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Turkey and Iran, as well as the main international player in the form of the U.S.

If one is to believe the information leaking from the Pentagon, the CIA and the NSA, Washington has practically “given up” on the Iraqi state in its present form and has instead taken to preparing the division of the country on an ethno-religious basis. The future states set to appear on the territory of present-day Iraq have already been given names – Sunnistan, Shiitestan and Kurdistan. Moreover, according to American policymakers, the Iraqi Kurdistan would also include the Kurdish regions of Syria. The question here is one of timing, of when this is supposed to occur, while at the same time ensuring an extremely smooth and “soft” breakup of Iraq to avoid the situation negatively impacting the Persian Gulf region, which includes avoiding the spread of the separatist metastasis to adjacent countries. Moreover, Kurdistan is already de-facto separated from Iraq and now lives her own life, which includes within the spheres of security and foreign relations, not to mention the economy. At a time when Assad’s regime in Damascus continues to persistently oppose the insurgents and is successfully cracking down on them, Washington is clearly afraid to risk a “revolution” in a neighbouring country, especially when NATO forces are set to leave Afghanistan in the not so distant future. The U.S. is unable to “handle” this many conflicts in the same region at once especially because Iran could openly intervene in Iraq. Iran could be supplying the legitimate Maliki government not only with weapons, but also with troops, which would help Baghdad crush the Sunnite terrorists who are being supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Additionally, they could offer significant help to Syria, where Assad is already being assisted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, troops from three Shiite Iraqi groups, including the Mahdi Army, as well as units from the Lebanese Hezbollah. If Iranian troops were to enter Syria, Damascus would be able to quickly crush the rebellion, clear the territory of foreign mercenaries and their own traitors while solving the issue without an intra-Syrian dialogue. Therefore, it is presently in Washington’s best interests not to disrupt Iraq’s current status-quo and not to involve Teheran in Iraqi matters. Especially since there has been a desire to normalise the relationship of the two countries between both presidents Obama and Rouhani.

Another matter altogether is the blatant interference from Riyadh, Doha, Ankara and Kuwait in Iraqi domestic affairs. A meeting was held recently between the senior intelligence representatives of these four nations to develop a single stance with respect to Baghdad, whereupon significant differences in goals and objectives were outlined. Turkey in particular is categorically opposed to the creation of a fully autonomous Kurdish state, understanding what it would mean for Turkey herself, where the Kurds make up about 30% of the total Kurdish population. Riyadh would not want dissolution of the Arabian part of Iraq into a Shi’ite and Sunnite enclave, imagining how the situation could repeat itself in her eastern province, while at the same time not wanting Iran’s role to grow in the Persian Gulf region. Kuwait has only one goal – to completely weaken her northern neighbour so that it would never again be able to occupy the emirate, even if Iraq needs to be broken into small pieces to accomplish this. Qatar had its own
opinions – instead of Teheran-supported Shiites in power in Baghdad, Qatar wants these positions to be taken by radical Sunni Islamists, which would weaken Iran’s influence in the Persian Gulf. However, all four countries were united under one common goal – to remove the Maliki government from power by any means necessary and instead give power in Baghdad to a coalition of Sunni parties and organisations with support by some Shiite groups, those who are not focused on Teheran but are instead leaning towards ideas of a united Arab nation. Meanwhile, the wager was made in favour of a sharp intensification in terrorist activity to shake the foundations of power for the present Iraqi leadership.

However, due to the fairly drastic measures taken by the army and security forces, with the help of the armed forces within some Sunnite tribes that are opposed to the breakup of Iraq, Maliki was able not only to put pressure on the insurgents but also to force them out to neighbouring Syria, mainly her northern and north-eastern areas. There, they entered into conflict with the local rebels, who are foreign to the ideas of creating an Islamic state based in Syria and the Iraqi Sunnite provinces and who are much more interested in toppling the Assad regime. Furthermore, fighting has broken out within these insurgent groups and their relations with the local Kurds have worsened since the latter made a stand against the presence of foreigners in their territory.

Does this mean that Baghdad can breathe a sigh of relief? Not at all. As the opposition in Syria begins shooting one another, while the fate of the anti-government rebellion is still unclear, Riyadh, Doha and Ankara are looking towards Iraq more frequently and with increasing aggression, understanding that they can strike a blow to Damascus’ back through Iraq, who has established a partnership with the Syrian government. Even more important is to cut Syria off from Iran, who is using the Iraqi land and air transit to provide military aid to Syria. This is why any situation from a number of possibilities could come true, including attempts to organize mass daily terrorist acts to pit Sunnites against Shiites and to cause public unrest. Due to this, it is only possible to forecast an exacerbation of the internal situation in Iraq and the broadening of terrorist activity there, including against the leading officials of the present regime in Baghdad. On the other hand, the Iraqi government understands what their “neighbours” want and could very well undertake countermeasures by sowing the seeds of unrest in Kuwait and aiding the Turkish Kurds, who have found refuge in the northern parts of the country. Saudi Arabia’s situation is not that great either, especially during a time when the health of the fossils in the higher echelons of the royal family is steadily getting worse. If Syria is able to crush the more dangerous centres of rebellion, the balance of power could very well shift away from the sponsors of the “Arabian revolutions”.

Vladimir Simonov, Middle Eastern Expert, Ph. D. in Historical Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook".