Shaky Situations in Syria and Iraq

Despite the fact that reports of an imminent end to the Syrian war and the beginning of its economic recovery appear quite often, it is still too early to say that the Syrian Arab Republic is entering a peaceful phase of its development. The latest developments in the East and South of the country are further proof of this, especially considering what is happening in the areas of Iraq which border Syria.

On October 22, the formations of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with the support of the US-led coalition, managed to establish control of the left bank of the Euphrates River and claim the largest oil deposit in Syria - al-Omar in the Deir ez-Zor. Meanwhile, the government forces of Damascus are based only three kilometers from this oilfield. Al-Tanak is also a large oil deposit, but it is already covered by the approaching Kurdish units, so it will most likely also go over to the SDF.

"The Kurds compete with the army of the Syrian Arab Republic for control of the oil-bearing areas," said the head of the Syrian Foreign Ministry, Walid Muallem. However, according to Mr. Muallem, Syria will not tolerate the violation of its sovereignty. Russian Senator Alexei Pushkov also commented on the ‘oil race’ and said that the main battle is yet to come.

Then again, according to the official version voiced by Damascus, the Syrian government already controls most of the oil and gas reserves. Earlier, Syrian Ambassador to China Imad Mustafa spoke of Damascus’ plans to regain control over 100% of the said reserves. The al-Omar oilfield had been under the control of ISIS terrorists, who, for the most part, profited from the trade of black gold. According to experts, the militants were pumping out at least 25,000 barrels per day from the al-Omar and al-Tanak oilfields. Now, they have lost their primary source of finance...
and are urgently transferring all funds to Europe. During their retreat, they destroyed the oil and gas infrastructure of the Syrian Arab Republic. It was already late September that news arrived of the militants having almost completely destroyed the entire infrastructure of the major gas reserves in Deir ez-Zor, while in al-Omar they were obliterated.

After the fall of Rakki, the Kurds received significant reinforcements, so they managed to develop their attacks at a very fast pace. Thus, on October 22, a message arrived reporting of the capture of another town on the Euphrates bank by the units of the SDF downstream the town Mayadeen. In connection with this, the Kurdish forces began to outpace the advance of Syrian government troops on the opposite shore. The goal here is obvious: the acquisition of Abu Kamal, which, like the oil and gas fields, is another strategic landmark in this race. Anyone who occupies this undoubtedly important crossroads (the starting point for five road directions) will also control the key point of entry into Syrian territory from Iraq. On October 16, after the attack of the Iraqi army on Kirkuk in the direction of the Syrian border in the northwest, the US forces tasked the SDF with taking control of the Syrian-Iraqi border and creating a barrier on the land route from Iran to Syria. Thus, Abu Kamal is the goal of the entire campaign on the left bank of Euphrates. As of now, it is only 70 km away from the Kurdish forces.

Supported by Russian advisers, Syrian Army units (which have become the main striking force in the Deir ez-Zor province on the right side of the river) are torn between the two assigned tasks. The first is taking control of as many oilfields as possible, and the second is reaching Abu Kamal sooner than the Kurds. The Kurds have no such problems, and the area itself is more favorable to them, so they can concentrate on one task at a time. In addition, while the capture of Rakka gives the SDF command more movability in resources, the capabilities of the government Syrian military are limited. It does not help that the government forces are badly shaken. Of course, they can free up a certain number of soldiers by dismissing security personnel and defending deposits in the center of the Syrian desert. But this requires a serious political decision so that they will not have to fight to reclaim these fields after the fact. Anyway, the state forces are not really numerous to begin with, especially considering the danger of Daesh militants taking over an unprotected area. After all, small mobile terrorist units are still roaming the desert.

The fighting will undoubtedly continue. None of the internal conflicts have been solved in the course of the war and new ones have been added, seemingly unsolvable by peaceful means. What is likely to change, though, is the form of future military clashes.

An issue that has already arisen is that of the post-war funding of the restoration of the devastated Syrian economy. The Russian-controlled sector requires at least 50 billion initial investments, and as much as USD 100 to 120 billion may be necessary to maintain the infrastructure at a level suitable for feeding the population. Clearly, such funds are still difficult to find. And refusing financial help is out of the question: the population exceeds the capacity of the economy twofold (by some estimates, even threefold). This in itself creates the conditions for a chaotic war for basic survival between literally everyone.

Military assistance from Iran and the Iraqi Shiite forces, which rest on the other side of the border, is moving quite slow with its intentions to rescue Damascus. These forces continue to advance northward in Iraqi Kurdistan towards the Turkish border.

In Baghdad, it is believed that the Kurds should return to the territories they occupied in 2003. It is quite logical. This way, the Kurdish territories of Iraq and Syria would no longer be connected, as Iraq and Turkey would separate them. Also, in this case, Iraq would regain a huge advantage in the form of the Kirkuk deposits and would once again cut off Barzani’s unimpeded and uncontrolled transit to Turkey. Then Baghdad will be able to claim the right to control the Kurdish streams. It is clear that Turkey is greatly supportive of such an end to the operation in Baghdad because this largely solves their problems with the Kurdish quasi-state of Rojava in Syria.

And so, it was not in vain that the Iraqi Kurdish opposition party Gorran urged Barzani to resign, removed the presidency and created the Government of National Salvation. In his clan and his DPK party, Barzani remains a recognized leader. However, the status of the leader of all Kurds is now lost to him. The Kurds are facing difficult times. Until now, they were a force to be reckoned with in Iraq, precisely because of their apparent unity. Now it is all gone in but a week. This development is probably most preferable for the United States. It could be, though, that due to the troubles of the current US administration, the States simply do not have a clear stance on the issue.

Nevertheless, as a result of the events that occurred last week, a shaky balance was established in Iraq with no clear advantage held by any of the ethno-confessional groups. The Sunni military group was crushed today. The Shiites are sharply divided over the policy toward Iran: the radicals are entirely under the control of the Iranians, but most Shiites are extremely dissatisfied with the strengthening Persian influence on Arab affairs. And now, the same fate of
disunity has befallen the Kurds. At the same time, the Iraqi government is much more inclined to cooperate with the US than with Iran, as the actions of the Iranians in Iraq have caused serious irritation among official authorities. Amid all this, US Secretary of State Mr. Tillerson called on the Iraqi government to begin expelling Iranian volunteers and bringing together Iranian allies from local Shiites communities. That, of course, will be received quite well in Baghdad. Another issue is that of Baghdad’s current opportunities of removing Iranians from Iraq. Apparently, there aren’t many. And much depends on what Tehran will attempt in Syria and Iraq.

Alexander Orlov, Political Scientist and Expert Orientalist, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”