Iraq’s future in question once again

As we approach April 30, the date of the parliamentary elections in Iraq, the situation is escalating dramatically in this country. A certain shock was caused by the figure published in Iraqi media on March 30 - more than 1,200 people were killed during the military “anti-terrorist” operations conducted in the Sunni province of Anbar in late December of last year. This situation threatens to spin out of control, if Iraqi military forces fail to cope with the Sunni extremist groups and the resistance movement of the former Baathists, who are going to increase their militant activities against the current Shiite government led by Prime Minister N. al-Maliki.

Unfortunately, his ruling Shiite block has carried out openly discriminatory policies against the Sunnis in recent years. There have been repeated purges of the state apparatus, armed forces, police, and intelligence services to clear them of Sunnis. The authorities have not responded to all attempts to start a dialogue, in order to reach a national consensus, and peaceful demonstrations ended the same way - in violent crackdowns with numerous victims. All these tough actions of the authorities were so extensive, that they caused a response from the Sunnis. So much so, that Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other GCC countries decided to refuse to help them with money, weapons, as well as the militants, in order to weaken the position of al-Maliki’s government, who was accused of excessive orientation on Iran – the main rival of the KSA and its allies in the Persian Gulf Region.

The number of people killed in Iraq in 2013 exceeded 9,000, while more than 1,000 people were killed in January 2014 alone. In addition, the above figures were actually published. Iraq cannot come out of it perilous condition, where the country can fall apart at any time. In fact, Iraqi Kurdistan has gone out of control from Baghdad. Now it is an independent formation with almost all the bodies of power, inherent to an independent state, including its own policy. The security situation in Baghdad, Salah al-Din, Neynava, Diyala and several other Sunni regions is extremely tense, while an actual civil war is being waged in Anbar. The province is on the brink of a humanitarian disaster.

It is obvious that the country has reached a deadlock just before the elections scheduled for April 30. The Parliament is incapacitated, as many lawmakers do not attend its meetings in protest against the policies of the government, and the absence of a quorum does not allow adopting any decisions. Not being approved and funded, a large number of bills remain on paper, and huge profits from oil and gas flow into the accounts opened in the United States. In recent weeks, an open split occurred among the Shiite leaders who understand the danger of continuing the hard political line of Al-Maliki, in the conditions of full corruption of his entourage.

The personal authority and political weight of the Prime Minister – who was considered, in February of this year, to be the favorite in the coming elections – and the influence of the “State Law” block, led by him, have decreased dramatically. All these factors greatly reduce the chances of Nouri al-Maliki to take the office of Prime Minister and Supreme Commander for the third time. We should say that all rulers of Iraq, who reigned during the last 10 years after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, behaved like minions. Many former functionaries of post-Saddam authorities live in prestigious neighborhoods in London. Many members of the current ruling group have prudently acquired real estate there. According to the parliamentary committee for the fight against corruption, the amount of money, stolen from the treasury and transferred abroad, approaches $200 billion.
Anticipating dangerous developments, the current authorities have spared no efforts in order to preserve the status quo (this is labeled as the "continuity of reforms") to prevent the transfer of power into the hands of their enemies. Recently, feverish attempts have been made to overcome the crisis, including by proposing rather unexpected initiatives. For example, Baghdad has officially announced its willingness to reshape the administrative map of the country by increasing the number of provinces from the current 18 – to 30. This willingness was supported by official statements, one of which (on establishing 4 new provinces as of January 21) was a surprise even to the residents of the Felludja municipality, not to mention the leadership of the province of Anbar. The artfulness of the idea of splitting, lies in the fact that it is intended to hit several targets at once:

- to split a “rebel” province with a predominant Sunni population, with a simultaneous attempt to bring to power representatives of those branches of the tribes that were included into the Sunni, but pro-al-Maliki, armed movement – the “Sahwa” (Awakening); in particular, it has been decided already to transform a number of municipalities in the provinces of Anbar, Salah al-Din and Neynava;

- to knock out a part of trump cards from the hands of the leadership of Iraqi Kurdistan, via the transformation of 4–5 municipalities into independent provinces, which should lead to a reduction in area and population of this autonomous region, a reduction of its specific weight and influence on the political scene of the country. And it is not only a question of the “disputed” territories in the provinces of Wasit, Diyala, Kirkuk and Neynava, but a question of the “native Kurdish” Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah;

- to change the overall balance of power in the country, by pushing loyal people into senior positions in the newly formed provinces. In the municipal elections in 2013, the ruling coalition lost governor posts even in such strategically important provinces as Baghdad and Basra, retaining less than a half of the governor posts.

However, given the current weakness of the state apparatus and increasing centrifugal aspirations of local authorities, the process can spin out of control, and redistribution of the country's territory could have an opposite result, with the separation of entire regions up to the establishment of autonomous entities (following the example of Kurdistan). Thus, the governor of the province of Neynava has already said that, in the event of taking practical steps to separate municipalities from the province, as it had been announced, all efforts would be taken to transform the province into an autonomous province. This statement was supported widely, including in the oil-rich South. There have already been demonstrations in the provinces of Basra and Maysan in support of the decision to grant the status of a province to several municipal districts, including those located in oil producing areas, with the further isolation of the “Confederation of the South”, by the example of Kurdistan.

In fact, there are prerequisites for the transformation of Iraq into a federal state with dozens of provinces that will be grouped together based on tribal ties, religious affinity and economic interests, into 3–4 autonomous territories (for convenience – Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni) with the sharp restriction on the powers of the central government.

Apparently, this is in the common interest of key players influencing the developments in Iraq. The U.S., Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, and possibly Iran, are interested that this country will never become a strong regional power, but will only serve as a major exporter of high quality cheap oil. Thus, it is very likely that the future of the state structure of Iraq, and the fate of the country, are now being decided not in Baghdad, but in secret negotiations between these parties. All of this this raises concerns about the prospects for the implementation of Russian interests in Iraq. Especially, as against the background of criticism of the head of the government by his political opponents, and coalition allies, who accuse al-Maliki of the usurpation of power, the Iraqi Prime Minister has once again decided to enlist the support of the United States.

Now, the main opponent of al-Maliki is Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite who was supported by Washington as the prime minister of the transitional government in 2004-2005. Allawi is the leader of the political coalition Al-Iraqia, which won by a slight margin over the “State Law” block in the parliamentary elections of 2010, but was unable to form the government. Criticizing the current Prime Minister for suppression of the political rights of Sunnis, Allawi, however, supports the fight against terrorist Islamist groups in the province of Anbar. It is characteristic that he does not avoid contact with Moscow in the military and technical sphere, within the fight against terrorism. The fact that makes him different from al-Maliki is his ties with the Saudi leadership, which consider Allawi as an alternative to the current Prime Minister, with whom the Saudis have developed a mutually hostile relationship.

The leader of Al-Iraqia will be supported by Riyadh in the upcoming elections. Against this background, the President of Kurdistan Massoud Barzani proposed a plan for the Iraq confederation. Although, it is clear that further decentralization of power in the country will lead to foreign interference in the internal political issues and may cause the disintegration of Iraq. Turkey is conducting the most active interventionist policy (through some Sunni
political forces), as well as Saudi Arabia, which supports a number of Sunni and Shiite leaders and Islamist radical groups. However, the decentralization of power in Iraq and the massive influx of Saudi investments into the country, if Allawi wins the election, are not in the interests of Russia. Indeed, the growing influence of external players – Saudi Arabia and Turkey – may push back the position of Russian companies in the Iraqi market.

Meanwhile, the preservation of the status quo is still the more likely scenario in Iraq – al-Maliki’s victory in the election and his continuing the policy of curbing separatism in cooperation with Russia and Iran. There is also a probability of postponing the elections to a later date, due to the difficult situation in the country, and the main opponents, al-Maliki and Allawi, actually have a tacit agreement on this matter. Al-Maliki’s staying in power is in the interests of Moscow. However, only time will tell what will actually happen. At that, we will not have to wait long.

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