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Tragedy of Iraq (II)

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Haider Al-Abadi was appointed the head of government in August 2014. He was deputy leader of the Islamic Dawa Party (the Islamic Call Party) when it was headed by Nouri al-Maliki, his old time associate. In October 2014 the Iraqi parliament held hearings on the defeat suffered by the military when the Islamic State forces took Mosul and Tikrit. Nouri al-Maliki accused everyone around him attempting to deflect blame for the rout. For instance, Kurds were condemned for betrayal. He never admitted his responsibility as the supreme commander.

The breathtaking success of the Islamic State in 2014 in Iraq would have been impossible if the Shia government led by Nouri al-Maliki had agreed to meet the demands (mainly just ones) of Sunni community in late 2013 for the sake of preserving the country's territorial integrity. Instead it made Sunni Muslims, who account for a third of the country's population, take arms.

By the middle of January, Sunni Muslims established their control over almost the entire province of Anbar, large parts of Ninawa and Salah ad Din provinces and swathes of territories in four Iraqi other governorates (provinces). It opened the way for the Sunni Islamic State to enter Iraq from the neighboring Syria where it was retreating before the Bashar Assad's forces and Kurds self-defense units of peshmerga volunteers.



In a few months the military of Iraq suffered defeat while the Islamic State formations approached Baghdad with only 20-30 km left to get to the capital. The Iraqi regular forces fled leaving behind weapons and equipment. Five army divisions and a division under the command of the Ministry of Interior ceased to exist. Over 7 thousand military surrendered and were fusilladed, over 12 thousand are still listed as missing in action. The Islamic State seized 2,500 armored military vehicles (including 100 US-produced Abrams M1A1 tanks), artillery pieces, ammunition storages etc. The United States has spent around \$22-24 billion on the Iraqi army which happened to be fully demoralized when it the time came to act. Actually there was no army in the «new Iraq» – it's hard to call «an army» a crowd of armed people in uniform plunged into a vicious cycle of corruption and patronage. In September 2014 it came to light that there were over 60 thousand «ghost servicemen» crowding the payrolls of the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior (they call them «spaceman soldiers» or 'fadhayin' in Iraq) in major fraud. The money was pocketed by thieves in civilian clothes and in uniform. Selling military positions and ranks has become a popular business in the country. The anticorruption commission has recently revealed that there were senior officers on active service without military education who did not know how to read and write.

Haider Al-Abadi, the new Prime Minister said the disarmament of armed formations and para-military forces operating outside the government control was a priority mission along with the fight against the Islamic State. But the new government still refuses to admit the fact that Iraq is split along ethnic lines. The plight of Sunni Muslims, who are insulted and humiliated, calls into doubt the accomplishment of set goals.



It their turn, Sunnis put forward the conditions for the support of the newly formed cabinet. They demand a formation of a national guard and the amnesty for former members of the Baath Party. It should be noted that not only Sunni Muslims were the party members as the US propaganda says. Iraqi Sunnis want their formations to have an official status to join the government forces in their struggle against the Islamic State. Their tactical alliance with the Islamic State came to an end in the summer of 2014 after the supporters of the caliphate went on a rampage introducing barbarian laws. They took hostage the entire populated areas and mercilessly eliminated everyone suspected of resistance. Back then Sunnis began intensive activities in the enemy's rear preventing the seizure of Baghdad. The Sahwa (or Awakening Councils) forces are a military militia of Sunni fighters. In their fight against the Islamic State they are joined by the Naqshbandi Army (the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order), which is mainly manned by former professional military who served in the armed forces in the days of Saddam Hussein's rule, as well as other Sunni armed formations. They all want one thing – up-to-date weapons. The central government stubbornly refuses to meet their demands. It went as far as to make the sheiks of Anbar province ask Iran for arms supplies. They approached Tehran on the issue in December 2014.

As before, the Shiite members of parliament constitute an irreconcilable majority now. They have certain apprehensions concerning the request for arms supplies. Sunnis formations are 80-120 thousand strong, according to various estimates. Providing them with weapons may lead to the creation of a powerful force which could turn against the central government after the Islamic State is pushed out of Iraq. Baghdad finds this prospect more frightening than the emergence of Islamic caliphate. The bill prepared by Haider Al-Abadi was first sent back to the government. Then the Shiite members of parliament came up with an idea to include the people's militia into the national guard or unite the Sunni armed units with the formations under the command of Hadi al-Ameri who believes that all Sunnis are supporters of the Islamic State and calls for their elimination on account of religious faith! He controls the Ministry of Interior which has twice as many personnel as the Ministry of Defense. The Shiite armed groups Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Peace Brigades (the Mahdi Army formerly) and Hezbollah come to the fore. New armed organizations have emerged like Division Abbas, for instance. They fill their ranks with Shiites only.

Kurds are a special case. 95% of Kurds are Sunni but the religious factor is not as strong as ethnicity. They enjoy the support of the West and have gained ground to significantly strengthen their positions. A US air base is under construction near Erbil in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq. The Kurdish authorities consider Kirkuk and oil rich chunks of land to be the territory of Kurdistan. They are ready to use force to protect the Kirkuk's status. Kurdish President Barzani says Kurds will not allow neither the Iraqi government forces, nor Shiite militia formations, nor anybody else enter the area. This land will always remain to be an inalienable part of Kurdistan. The Kurdish peshmerga forces did well fighting the Islamic State groups near Sinjar (Nineveh

governorate), as well as in the provinces of Diyala and Kirkuk. Their commanders say they will join the Iraqi forces in the battle of Mosul but only because this city is located near Kurdistan and the radicals pose a threat to the Kurdish autonomy. Before that, Iraqi Kurds had actively supported Syrian Kurds by sending reinforcements to Kobane. Kurds have little desire to join the fight in the near-by areas which do not belong to what they consider as their sphere of interests (for instance, the Province of Anbar).

The Islamic State does its best to expand the battle area to other parts of the Middle East. They have attacked a Saudi border guard force, they threaten Jordan and try to get to US military facilities in Iraq. They have attacked air bases in Tikrit and Balad (2014), Ain al-Asad and Habbani (2015) – the facilities with US military presence. The mission is to cause casualties among Americans and make them have boots on the ground. Shiites have let their stance known - in case of US ground forces intervention they will turn their weapons against Americans to change the correlation of forces.

The Islamic State has turned into a global threat, that's what everybody agrees with. Jordanian king Abdullah II believes it's the start of WWIII. 60 states have joined the anti-Islamic State coalition while citizens of 90 countries have come to fight under the Islamic State banners. The militants' armed formations are 20-80 thousand strong. The estimates vary according to different sources.

Diversified, well-coordinated, tough and resolute steps are required to successfully counter the Islamic State. Nothing like that is on the horizon. The coalition announced its readiness to offer diplomatic, humanitarian and military support to Iraq. Some countries have sent military instructors to upgrade the Iraqi military skills. They all refuse the idea of boots on the ground.

Jurgen Todenhofer, former German politician, who has fiercely opposed the war in Iraq, visited Mosul in 2014 and could see with his own eyes what the caliphate was like from inside. He was shocked by unbelievable cruelty of the militants and the scope of their plans. "The first strong impression is that the Islamic State is much stronger than I thought, much cleverer." He said the extremist fighters have an "incredible enthusiasm and sense of victory", with total certainty that they will win the war for the Middle East. He described how he saw hundreds of fighters arriving each day to join the Islamic State with recruits from all over the world and all walks of life. Todenhofer stressed that the fighters display an "enthusiasm" about "killing hundreds of millions of people". He concluded chillingly, "I do not see anybody who has a real chance to stop them." According to him, "Only Arabs can stop the Islamic State; the Western countries will never stop it."

The United States and its allies have been constantly saying that the caliphate had to be eliminated. Since August 2014 the US aviation has been delivering air strikes against the Islamists with 15-20 sorties a day (two thirds of strikes are delivered against the Islamic State forces deployed in Syria). For comparison the anti-Iraq coalition made over 1000 sorties daily in 2003.

On March 2, Baghdad announced its intention to launch an offensive to re-take Tikrit considered to be the main springboard for subsequent liberation of Mosul. The seizure of Tikrit and Mosul

by Iraqi forces could become the starting point of the Islamic State's debacle. It's worth to note that the United States refused to provide air support in Tikrit because the Iranian Quds units (special operations) are taking part in the combat.

On March 8, Iraqi media reported that Tikrit was fully encircled citing the sources linked to the people's militia led by Hadi al-Ameri. On March 9, US Army General Martin Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Defense Minister Khaled al-Obeidi during a day-long visit. He listened to the opinion of US advisers who took part in the planning of the operation. Looks like Americans are in no hurry to exploit the success. Anyway, this is the sixth attempt to recapture Tikrit during the recent ten months. In 2014 they cautiously predicted in Washington that the war against the Islamic State would last at least three years. Pentagon spokesman Rear-Admiral John Kirby has recently said it will take five years to defeat the Islamic State. It's hard to imagine how much grief and suffering it will bring to many thousands of people.