Saudi Arabia at the beginning of this year is experiencing a number of fairly serious crises, above all in the political, economic and financial areas.

There is the ongoing fallout from the scandalous, and still unresolved, murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi embassy in Istanbul. Both the USA and Turkey have, quite reasonably, accused Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman of involvement. The position of the Turkish president, Recep Erdoğan, is entirely understandable: in the murky waters of the Saudi crisis he is fishing for an advantage – in the form of financial leverage in his country’s economy. It appears from the silence of the “free” Turkish media that he has succeeded, or almost succeeded, in this.

To tell the truth, as far as concerns Saudi Arabia, with its monarchical dictatorship, there is nothing surprising in that: people who disagree with the Saudi leaders suffer fates ranging from questioning under torture of various kinds to public execution by beheading. But this is the first time that the regime has killed a well-known journalist in a foreign country. In this we can recognize the distinctive signature of the Israeli security forces, Mossad, with whom the Saudi intelligence forces have established efficient contacts, and who do not hesitate to share their skills with those “executioners” who are more experienced, and less troubled by moral concerns, when it comes to international law and human rights.

However, there remains that so-called democracy, the United States of America. Donald Trump, the US President, after careful consideration, chose to dispense with long meaningless speeches about democracy, and instead came out in support of the Saudi Crown Prince. He justified this choice in the simplest, most cynical way possible: if he were to put pressure on Saudi Arabia then the latter might choose to cancel its arms contracts with the US and buy from Russia and China instead. As they say, money talks. In addition, Saudi Arabia is still a faithful ally of the USA in
their joint campaign to stifle Iran's economy, and if Riyadh were to take offence then it would put that “project” at risk.

Everything seemed cut and dried, until the Democratic Party, always looking out for an opportunity to unseat the erratic Donald Trump, decided to take action. As Senator Lindsey Graham, representing South Carolina, said: “You have to be willfully blind not to come to the conclusion that this was orchestrated and organized by people under the command of Mohammad bin Salman.” He added that he could no longer cooperate with Saudi Arabia or support the sale of arms to the kingdom while it was headed by the “crazy” Crown Prince. Senator Bob Corker also spoke out: he said that the Crown Prince had ordered the murder and monitored it, and that “if he were in front of a jury, he would be convicted of murder in about 30 minutes.”

In the middle of December the US Senate approved a resolution stating that Mohammad bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, was responsible for the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and calling on the Saudi authorities to “ensure appropriate accountability for all those responsible.” The senators also approved a resolution to end US support for Saudi Arabia in the hostilities in Yemen. That resolution calls on the President to withdraw all US forces involved in those hostilities, other than those directly involved in fighting Al-Qaeda. The US President Donald Trump declared that he would veto that document, since relations with Saudi Arabia were essential in countering the threat that Iran allegedly poses to the region.

In turn Saudi Arabia, aware that it had the personal support of Donald Trump, criticized the US Senate’s decision to pass the resolutions calling on Washington to stop supporting Riyadh in the Yemen conflict, and implicating Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The Saudi Foreign Minister declared that the Kingdom would not accept any “disrespect” for its leaders. Saudi Arabia also expressed the hope that the Kingdom would not be “drawn into domestic political debates in the United States of America” to avoid any negative effect on the “important strategic relationship” between the USA and Saudi Arabia.

In an article published on the Al-Arabiya site, Turki Aldakhil, a close advisor of the Crown Prince and the director of the news channel – which is funded by Saudi investors – even gave some clues about the form that the retaliation might take: oil prices “jumping to $100 or $200 a barrel, or even double that figure”, discontinuing purchases of arms from the USA, ceasing to cooperate with Western governments on security issues, opening Russian bases in the North of the peninsula, and even a rapprochement with its archenemy Iran! “The USA would be stabbing itself”, he resentfully added.

Washington also needs to continue financing Syrian terrorists, who seek, jointly with Washington and Riyadh, to topple Bashar al-Assad. Despite Donald Trump’s official declaration that US troops are being withdrawn from Syria, the Pentagon has no intention of departing but the financing has been discontinued. Here the key issues are therefore Saudi financing both the terrorists and the continuing presence of US troops in Syria. There are reliable reports that the number of US troops based in Syria actually increased by 600 at the end of January. The Pentagon claims that their presence there is necessary to help with the evacuation of US troops, and that it is packing up some of the equipment in its Syria bases.

In other words, Washington’s and Riyadh’s plans in Syria have gone up in smoke, and the huge amounts of money spent by the latter have failed to bring it any strategic or economic dividends. Similarly huge sums have been spent on the completely unnecessary war in Yemen, in which the main victims are non-combatants: old people, women and children. It seems that, as a result, there is no longer much enthusiasm for the “Saudi Vision 2030” program, which aims to transform Saudi Arabia’s ultra-traditional society, dependent as it is on oil, and develop it in a more contemporary direction. How can that transformation begin when the Kingdom is dependent on 10 million migrant workers who do all the dirty and heavy work? Saudi citizens generally work (if they work at all) in state organizations, mostly in undemanding managerial roles. In the private sector Saudi citizens generally get plum positions which involve no actual work: they are nominal owners, directors, chairmen or presidents of various companies, as legally no foreigner can do business in his own name in Saudi Arabia.

As far as shared interests are concerned, it is particularly worth remembering the USA’s multinational oil lobby. Firstly, it has very close relations with Saudi Arabia. Secondly, there is a financial lobby, which is interested in destabilizing the whole of the Middle East. It aims to transfer all possible forms of financial capital to the USA, which would in turn play a new role - that of an oasis of stability in a chaotic world. This would also promote economic stability in America itself, as the country’s foreign debt continues to grow on a daily basis. Thirdly, there is the military-industrial complex, which is increasing its arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi royal family, which has ruled the country for more than 80 years, is experiencing rising popular discontent
at home. This discontent is being inflamed by events occurring elsewhere in the Arab world and which are outside Riyadh’s control, and also by the country’s own diminishing influence in the international community, as a result of a number of factors, including the decline in its oil reserves. It has been watching events closely, and has seen, with mounting unease, how a number of dictators in the Middle East have been toppled with the tacit support of the USA. Saudi Arabia also has serious concerns about its own future, particularly in relation to the imminent handover of power to a new king, assuming such a handover takes place. For Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the last surviving son of the nation’s founder, is an elderly man and is not likely to remain in power for much longer. In this situation, the Saudi leadership, and in particular the ruling Al Saud family, is very concerned that after King Salman’s death they may lose much of their political power - a situation which Iran might well take advantage of. This seems all the more likely in view of the fact that 8% of Saudi Arabia’s population are Shi’ite Muslims, living in the east of the country, which is also where the vast majority of the country’s oil fields are located. And the Shi’ite uprising during the 2011 Arab Spring, which was harshly suppressed by the security forces, serves as a clear indication that Saudi regime’s fears are not unfounded.

Given the way things are developing, the royal family needs to weaken Iran as much as possible, in order to prevent it from seizing the initiative in such a way. In these difficult times for the Al Saud dynasty, it will need its alliance with the USA and President Trump – that partnership between the hedgehog and the snake – more than ever before.

Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”