Biden Fine-Tunes the Saudi Trombone

No one doubts today that Biden is not a promising politician, but his one-term administration. As such, he is not making any far-reaching plans, for him it is important to change the vector of American policy, rejecting, in particular, the "Trump era".

So, despite the fact that the new head of the White House is obviously not counting on a long-term personal stay at the helm of the American choir, from the very first day he began to actively retune all available voices and instruments — from the Tyrolean horns with Nord Stream-2 to the Middle Eastern "instruments" — to the interests of the Democratic Party of the USA. Of course, he did not forget about the Saudi trombone, which all US presidents actively play, and he was quick to put it in its place, making several public statements about a temporary ban on the sale of American weapons to Saudi Arabia and about refusing to support Riyadh in the war against the Hussein insurgents in Yemen.

The Democrats make it clear that they have their own plans for Saudi Arabia. For instance, Washington intends to minimize any direct contact between US President Joe Biden and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, publicly demonstrating the end of the "immunity" that the Trump administration has granted Saudi Arabia on many issues, including the human rights situation and the war in Yemen. As for the desire to minimize personal contacts between Joe Biden and the crown prince, there is clearly a fear of falling into a similar situation with bin Salman, by analogy with the Biden corruption scandal in Ukraine that has not yet been forgotten. Especially since, back in 2018,
the international press was actively discussing bin Salman's bragging to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed that "Trump's son-in-law Kushner is in his pocket."

As for the issue of arms deliveries, the White House clearly wants to link it to the need to develop a concept for the Persian Gulf countries, but it is not there yet. Developing this strategy will involve Iran, the Syrian problem, and Russia, which will take some time.

Biden's intention to "retune" US-Saudi relations was recently pointed out by White House press secretary Jen Psaki:

“The American people expect US policy on its strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia to prioritize the rule of law and respect for human rights. Accordingly, the United States will cooperate with Saudi Arabia where our priorities coincide and will not shy away from defending US interests and values where they do not”.

However, it is quite clear that this "retuning" of relations is nothing more than Biden's public flogging of the puppets who are not fully under his control. After all, under the Biden administration any serious deterioration of Saudi-American relations because of the war in Yemen is unlikely to happen, because this war began under Obama, and it was Biden who was then vice-president. The same can be said of arms sales to Saudi Arabia, since it was former US leader Obama who sold more weapons to the kingdom than any of his Republican or Democratic predecessors. The relationship between Riyadh and Washington is historic, deep, enduring and strategic, not subject to change because of a change of president.

Yes, Biden's pre-election criticisms of Saudi Arabia and, especially, Prince Mohammed bin Salman have caused Riyadh to think about building a renewed "correct policy" with Washington, hence Saudi Arabia was the last Gulf country to congratulate the newly elected US president on his election victory. But even Riyadh is well aware that Biden is unlikely to change the US-Saudi relationship, most likely only by making tougher demands for continued American support. For example, it could demand the release of women's rights defenders and other human rights issues, more active Riyadh in rapprochement with Israel, more involvement in the information war against Iran.

In particular, the next step in this "retuning" of the Saudi regime — the upcoming report to Congress regarding the 2018 murder of The Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi by individuals associated with the royal family — is quite expected in Riyadh. It will probably assess the involvement of the Crown Prince, whom the White House is already trying to portray as a pariah. In this case, based on the unruly nature of the United States, there are hints that the best outcome for Saudi Arabia would be his removal and seclusion in his castle in France, although no consideration is given to how such a situation would be interpreted by Crown Prince Mohammed himself. Especially since his father is of an advanced age and has serious health problems, and since the heir to the throne was repeatedly credited with trying to persuade him to "voluntarily" give up the throne.

It is known how categorically the authorities in Saudi Arabia were against all kinds of women's rights, considering it to be inconsistent with the tenets of Islam. However, recalling the change of power in the White House, Saudi human rights activists Lujain al-Khazlul and Nuf Abdel Aziz were released the other day. These ladies were detained in the middle of last year at the height of the campaign against human rights defenders. President Biden has already responded approvingly to the move, showing Riyadh that "it will be properly evaluated in Washington."

Sensing new winds from Washington, other Saudi human rights activists have already joined in discrediting the policies of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. According to Arabi 21, Madawi al-Rashid, spokeswoman for the opposition Saudi party Al-Tajammu al-Watani (People's Assembly), stated the need to end the torment caused by bin Salman's government, stressing that "with new US President Joe Biden coming to power, he cannot be expected to take any repressive action against the Saudi people."

The Biden administration's intention to submit to Congress a CIA report on the circumstances of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi fits into the same "retuning". Given that the Democrats have a majority in Congress, we can assume that Biden will have room to maneuver in this matter to obtain further concessions from the kingdom, to use this case as a powerful argument to influence Riyadh.

Vladimir Platov, an expert on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".