Pakistan and the situation in Yemen

On March 26, 2015, Crown Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) appealed to the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif requesting to join the coalition of Persian Gulf countries, headed by KSA against Yemen. Since March 26, 2015, the coalition air force has been dealing out airstrikes on the territory of their neighboring country, which is controlled by Houthis. Following the bombings, the air force planned a ground operation, in which participation from allied troops was implicated (Egypt and Pakistan).

On the same day, the Prime Minister of Pakistan announced unlimited military support for the coalition’s actions. The burst of impulsive words from the head of Pakistan is explained through several circumstances:

- A long-time patron of the Sharif royal family clan and Muhammad Nawaz Sharif (in 2000 during the rule of General Pervez Musharraf, he was accused and that Riyadh acted on his behalf by providing shelter for seven long years);

- The KSA is one of Islamabad’s key economic financial investors, including his nuclear program (in 1999, Saudi Arabia free of charge, offered raw oil to Pakistan, in light of the economic difficulty due to U.S. sanctions in answer to nuclear tests in May 1998.

- 1.7 Million Pakistanis send funds to their homeland, working in various sectors of the KSA economy.

On March 28, 2015, due to the deterioration of the law and order situation in Yemen and under the order of the Prime Minister, the Pakistan government took steps to evacuate urgently Pakistani community and government workers from Yemen.

- Events in Yemen, airstrikes on positions held by Shiite-Houthis instigated an unexpected reaction from Pakistan: sudden protests by the Shiite community; unrestrained consent to Riyadh actions; a call to peaceful settlement of the conflict.

Pakistan authorities are wary that supporting military intervention by Saudi Arabia in Yemen might provoke another wave of sectarian violence in the country. In 2014 attacks on representatives of religious minorities became more frequent and members of the leading Shiite organization Majlis-i-Wahdat-i-Muslimeen warned that such attacks threaten the Muslim Ummah.

Furthermore, events in the Middle East provoked splits in the Sunni community in Pakistan (98% of the nation’s population is Sunni). Hafiz Saeed, leader Jamaatud Dawa expressed unity with “…KSA against threats coming from Yemen”; another religious rights party Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazl (represented in both houses of parliament) spoke in defence of the “holy city”. Leaders of the religious rights party Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan declared that Saudi Arabia took steps unilaterally, without consulting with the Muslim community or the consent of the Organization of Islam States. At the same time, the Sunni Ittehad Council appealed to the government to refrain from accepting the policies of any specific country and make efforts to peacefully settle the crisis.

The urgency with which the Prime Minister of Pakistan spoke out for Saudi Arabia in the Yemen crisis, once again cast a shadow on his image as the head authority in the nation. Subsequent events have called into question the
fulfillment of the promises made by Islamabad.

In March 30, 2015, the Pakistani Foreign Ministry issued an official statement in which he reaffirmed support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia, Islamabad’s desire to play a significant role in preventing the deterioration of the situation in the Middle East and to promote the early resolution of the crisis and to promote the peace and unity of the Muslim Ummah, and called on the United Nations, OIC and the international community to play a major role in finding a political solution to the crisis.

The opposition in the Pakistani parliament after an analysis of the current situation in the Middle East came to the conclusion that there is no need to protect the holy places in the territory of the KSA. Collated military aggressors against the Gulf of Yemen looked to release a propaganda thesis about protecting Mecca and Medina in its territory from possible attacks by Shiite Houthis of Yemen, while it inflicted airstrikes on the territory of a neighboring sovereign country. This thesis was used by M. Nawaz Prime Minister Sharif when he declared unconditional support for military actions against Yemen to protect the territorial integrity of the KSA.

Thus, the opposition in Islamabad emphasized that "war in Yemen is not war in Pakistan and accordingly, the national policy should be based first, on this specific situation and second, in unison with all political parties, and not guided by the decision of one man." "Pashtuns have suffered much because of the government's decision to get involved in someone else's war in Afghanistan. The government is repeating the same mistake, intending to send troops to Yemen," - said the leader of the Awami National Party, President Asfandyar Wali Khan.

Currently in Saudi Arabia, according to Defense Minister, Khawaja Asif, there are little more than 1,000 Pakistani soldiers. Of these, 750 are on a rotating basis, and mainly consist of instructors. Pakistan supports their long-term military-technical cooperation with KSA. According to the director of the Department of Public Relations Staff of Pakistan, General Asim Bajwa, on KSA territory, as of March 19, 2015, joint exercises code named ExSamsam-5 are being conducted. Pakistani and Saudi media have emphasized the importance of the annual celebration of similar operations over the past ten years. In 2014, they were held in Pakistan near Jhelum.

Now ExSamsam-5 exercises are conducted near the Saudi city of Taif in difficult mountainous terrain. They involve the Royal Air Force, Land Forces Aviation, Border Guards of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and 292 Pakistani soldiers from Pakistan Special Forces. The official purpose of the exercises is to maintain close military ties with Saudi Arabia and share experience. The rate of Pakistan Army from the beginning denied the operational deployment of troops in SA. It is obvious that the direction of the Pakistani Special Forces and exercises were agreed on in early February, 2015 during a visit to the KSA from General R. Mahmoud, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of Pakistan, on the eve of the military aggression of the coalition in the Persian Gulf countries.

Answering the question of a possible ground operation in the mountainous border area between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, a representative from the coalition, Ahmed al-Asiri expressed readiness: "if the situation demands a ground operation, it will happen..., our ground troops are well trained and mountain areas will not be an obstacle to achieving our goals ...."

Experience in the military and military-technical cooperation between Riyadh and Islamabad, since the 60s of the twentieth century confirms that Rawalpindi (location of Army Staff of Pakistan) sends commands to Saudi Arabia and NCOs officers and this was no exception in that respect in 2015.

The issue of the additional amount of Pakistani troops to be sent to the Persian Gulf region has been put to the civil authorities, together with the political opposition.

Here are several factors that established the likely refusal of the military and political establishment in Pakistan to participate in the activities of the Middle East military coalition in Yemen:

- A significant number of federal troops is currently involved in a military operations against militants in multiple Pashtun tribe areas on the Afghani border (also in April, 2015 an operation on the return of internally displaced persons back to North Waziristan was launched, the organization transferring the locals requires additional troops);

- Activation of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan and the threat to the government and national unity. For Pakistan, it re-creates the danger of cross-border militant transitions and, therefore, the mobilization of internal forces for regrouping. As acknowledged by President Ashraf Ghani, "after the presidential elections in September 2014, the Taliban attempted to overthrow the new government... the short term beginning to 2015 will be very difficult for Afghanistan, approaching a tough battle."
Thus, the Middle East is becoming another world center for the next military clashes between regional states. Saudi Arabia serves as its main financial benefactor serves, while the main strike force is the Egyptian army. Additional military support from Rawalpindi means pulling Islamabad into a new military struggle, raging far beyond state borders, which is not in the national interest of Pakistan.

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