Where is the Middle East heading?

At last Washington has realized the destructiveness of the recent inflammatory policy of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to destabilize the situation in the Middle East. This is confirmed in a very interesting article by Middle East expert Robin Wright which appeared in the Sunday section of the influential American newspaper The New York Times on September 28, that is, the very next day after the consensus vote of the UN Security Council on Resolution 2118, which sets the basic parameters for the elimination of the chemical arsenal in Syria. For specialists there is no need to explain that this resolution goes far beyond the issues associated with Syrian chemical weapons, and concerns the most serious topics affecting the future of the entire region.

Wright makes no reference to the article published in the June 2006 issue of Armed Forces Journal by Colonel Ralph Peters, "Blood borders: How a better Middle East would look", in which Peters predicts a rearranging of the current boundaries of the Middle East, but reproduces it with slight modifications.

The main topic of these two articles is the fate of the Gulf monarchies. In the new map as drawn by Robin Wright, in place of Saudi Arabia and the oil emirate dwarfs appear not three, as in Peters' version (there some parts of Saudi Arabia are attached to either Jordan or Yemen), but five countries: South Arabia, North Arabia, Western Arabia (with the shrines of Islam, historic Hejaz), Eastern Arabia (where the major Saudi oil reserves are located and the population is predominantly Shia) and Wahhabistan (or historical Nejd), now the location of Riyadh, capital of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Along the way, the author "dismembers" Syria and Iraq along ethno-religious lines, as well as Yemen. It is interesting that on this map Iran remains untouched - a huge state, hanging over the fragmented Arab dwarfs.

How should we interpret the appearance of this article if, immediately after its publication, the first telephone contact in the last 30-plus years took place between the leaders of the United States and Iran? Was it purely out of scientific interest that the author shook up and updated a seven-year-old concept of the U.S. military? Or did the author want to tell us about the depth of the split in the Arab and Islamic world after two and a half years of bloody Syrian conflict?

I think not. Thinkers work at The New York Times, and such articles, which are unlikely to please U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf, wouldn't appear just like that at such a historic moment.

There is some reason to believe that this publication was well targeted and the editors knew to whom it was addressed and what they wanted to say, and right now. It is impossible to perceive as a coincidence that for the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia's participation in the meetings of the UN General Assembly, the speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Saud Al-Faisal, one of the patriarchs of Middle East diplomacy, scheduled for October 1, was cancelled just after the publication of this thoroughly remarkable article (as well as after the Security Council vote on Resolution 2118 and Ruhani's conversation with Obama).

We venture to suggest that this article is a symptom of the slow but inexorable parting of ways of Saudi and American policy in the Middle East. Riyadh has based its whole foreign policy in recent years on confrontation with Shiite Iran and its allies Syria and Iraq, on convincing the United States and Israel to "chop off the snake's head" (ie., the regime of the mullahs in Iran) as we learned from Wikileaks' publication of U.S. State Department telegrams (as
a curiosity, we note that reading them is still not allowed for employees of the U.S. Department of State, as their classified status has not been lifted). And now the Saudi monarchy has suddenly discovered that, without holding any consultation with it, Washington has entered into dialog with its historic Shiite rival behind its back. This occurred immediately after the Security Council adopted a resolution on Syria's chemical arsenal that actually puts an end to the hopes of Riyadh for a quick U.S. military operation against Syria. Saudi diplomacy had mobilized all its resources to achieve, on the eve of the 68th session of the UN General Assembly, approval of the Arab League for a decision calling for military intervention in that country.

There is cause for them to be disappointed in their allies. But that's not all. In the United States, in The New York Times and other influential publications, a raft of publications has begun to appear, according to which in the ranks of the Syrian opposition there are virtually no moderate secular forces, while two-thirds of the opposition are notorious extremists hiding behind the banner of Islam. It makes it clear for Washington that these people are not the path to a brighter democratic future in Syria. And who sponsors the radical Islamists – this is well known.

It is clear that the Saudi leaders may for some time ignore these powerful signals of their close ally, but they cannot be unaware that in the United States there is a deep rethinking of its own experience in the Middle East in the past 20 years. And its results are unconsoling. In Washington, there is clearly no desire to go down the same path for a third time with the same results. There is a desire to find a political solution to Middle East problems including Iran, and the need for this has been repeated over the years by diplomacy of Russia, China and other BRICS countries. This does not yet mean that there has been a review of U.S. policy objectives, but there is clearly a re-evaluation of the tools that can be used. And it calls for less Tomahawks, more talks.

Of course, White House policy is inconsistent, contradictory and not fully clear. For example, how can you continue to arm the Syrian opposition, even if relatively secular or only moderately religious, and egg it on to capture Damascus, while the army of Bashar al-Assad is conducting a relentless fight against the worst enemies of America – Al-Qaeda and its supporters who are striving to create a Middle East Wahhabi Caliphate. However, there is no doubt that new and very strong accents are appearing in U.S. policy in the Middle East.

In this context, Robin Wright's article can be read this way: yes, in Washington, as well as among advocates of an Islamic Sunni caliphate, there is support for the rejection of borders drawn after WWI on the basis of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and also belief that the deep ethnic and religious contradictions in the predominantly Sunni Arab area will lead to its Balkanization. That is, the Gulf states' policies (including in Syria and Iraq), aimed at supporting the Sunnis and their shock troops in the form of the Wahhabis, as well as overthrowing Bashar al-Assad and R. Al-Maliki, could achieve a completely different result. Namely, the collapse of these states, and after that, not the creation of a single caliphate, but their own collapse. And the responsibility for all this will be borne by the oil monarchies. So Washington's advice is clear: if you do not want such a result – change your general line.

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