Evolution of the “centers of power” in the Middle East

In September and October 2013, there occurred a series of changes in the U.S. policy in the Middle East. First of all, we are talking about the USA’s refusal from military intervention in Syria at the present, and some softening of the American position towards Iran and its nuclear program. These changes have caused a negative reaction from the most important American allies, such as the regional “centers of power”, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Turkey.

KSA has positioned itself as a leader of the Muslim Sunni world. After the start of the “Arab Spring” in 2011, the KSA has provided support to Sunni Islamist movements in a number of countries in order to create a block of the Sunni rulers. This was a kind of revival of the “Caliphate”, where the KSA would play a dominant role. Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the KSA has actively supported the Syrian Sunni armed opposition, whose goal was to overthrow President Assad and to establish an “Islamic state”. Youssef Karadaui and Mohammed Aarun, well-known Sunni ideologists who settled in the KSA, presented some scientifically based rules, calling for the initiation of jihad against the Syrian leadership, represented mainly by the Alawites. Bandar bin Sultan, the head of KSA secret service, and member of the Saudi ruling dynasty, financed the armament of the Syrian rebels.

As for the attitude towards Shiite Iran, the KSA and other Gulf monarchies, united in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG), under the auspices of the KSA, have seen in this country a threat to their regimes, since the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. They accuse Iran of “Shiite expansionism” and the desire to expand the idea of a Shiite Islamic revolution in the CCASG countries, which have quite numerous Shiite communities, some of which are fighting against the infringement of their rights by the Sunni ruling regimes. As an example, it is necessary to cite the protests of the Shiite Muslims, who represent the majority population of Bahrain, against the ruling Sunni Al Khalifa dynasty in 2011-2013. These actions were suppressed by the authorities with the help of Saudi troops. Moreover, Iran and a number of international human rights organizations accused the government of Bahrain and the KSA of using weapons against the demonstrators, which led to many killed and injured people.

Turkey has a similar attitude towards the Syrian conflict and wants to create a block of Sunni states. The current Turkish leadership, represented by moderate Sunni Islamists, coming from the “Muslim Brotherhood”, considers the Syrian Sunni opposition as its allies and provides them full support in their struggle against Assad. In addition, part of the Turkish political establishment, professing the ideology of “neo-Ottomanism”, has not forgotten that Syria was part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire for 400 years. There is an unsolved territorial dispute between Turkey and Syria on the “Sanjak of Alexandretta”. This territory was once a part of the Ottoman Empire. After defeat in the First World War, and Turkey’s collapse (1922), the territory was transferred to Syria. As for the Turkish policy towards Iran, Turkey competes with it for leadership in the region. Thus, one of Turkey’s global interests is the weakening of Iran’s ally, Syria. An important role in the politics of KSA and Turkey against Iran is fueling a Sunni-Shiite conflict, which increased after the Syrian conflict started. Sunni ideologists, especially in the KSA, consider that the Alawite Syrian leaders are “not true Muslims and Infidels”. However, Turkey, in contrast to the KSA, does not consider Iran a potential threat or a potential enemy.

KSA and Turkey’s attitudes towards Syria and Iran have largely followed the strategy of the U.S., Israel and NATO. Namely, the removal of the Assad regime, one of Iran’s allies, offered the possibility of making a subsequent strike
on Iranian nuclear objects, to suppress the Hezbollah Shiite movement, supported by Syria and to minimize Iranian influence in Iraq. KSA and Turkey expected that the planned U.S. military strike on Syria would have led to the defeat of the Syrian army, caused the fall of Assad's leadership, and ended with the installation of the Syrian Sunni opposition. Moreover, the KSA and some members of the CCASG wanted even to reimburse the expenses of the U.S.'s strike against Syria. These last two were disappointed by the refusal from U.S. military intervention in Syria. At the same time, this decision was a forced step on the part of the U.S. administration. It was the result of a split in opinions on military intervention in the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. The pretext of Syrian army's use of chemical weapons against opposition groups was vivid. Protests against U.S. military intervention took place in many countries, including the EU. Even the Pope of Rome expressed his opposition to an attack. The position of Russia and its initiative to get the EU involved in the subsequent destruction of the Syrian chemical weapons, supported by Syria, had a great impact on stopping the planned military intervention. As a result, Russia’s authority and influence rose greatly and was new proof that the country is an important actor in global politics.

Along with this, the U.S. position towards Iran changed after the election of the new Iranian president Hassan Rouhani and his statements about being ready for greater openness and cooperation with the West on Iran's nuclear program. The new, less rigid, policy of President Rouhani, compared to its predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, could contribute to the lifting of economic sanctions against Iran. CSA, as well as Turkey, were greatly disappointed and even frustrated and irritated, by the changed U.S. policy toward Syria and Iran. This could have been observed by the refusal of the KSA to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. This refusal was motivated by the fact that the UN Security Council, according to the KSA, was "paralyzed the actions of its permanent members and it could not solve international problems, including condemnation of the crimes of Assad’s regime, ending of the civil war in Syria, and the solving of the Palestinian problem". Some media quoted Bandar bin Sultan, one of the most influential members of the ruling family and head of the KSA secret service. He said that the KSA might revise its cooperation with the U.S. in the field of arms purchases, supply of energy resources to the United States, and to a lesser extent coordinate with the USA its policy towards Syria. The KSA, from its point of view, also complained about the “lack of the United States’ support of the KSA during anti-government demonstrations in Bahrain. At the same time, what Bandar bin Sultan said during a meeting with foreign diplomats cannot be regarded as official policy. These are not necessarily the views of King Abdullah of the KSA or Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz, and perhaps this discourse is connected with conflicts within the royal family.

As for Turkey, many experts believe that this country showed its position by the purchase of modern long-range air defense systems from China, which was an unprecedented arms purchase by a NATO member country from China. The U.S. and NATO, including the Secretary General of NATO, have expressed their concern about this transaction. In particular, it has been stated that the air defense system, made in China, will not match the weapons systems used by NATO, and it will create difficulties both for NATO and for Turkey. The implementation of the transaction remains an open question. However, the Turkish Prime Minister, Mr. Erdogan, said that the transaction with China "does not depend on the position of NATO".

Thus, we can say that there is a tendency of the KSA and Turkey to detach themselves from the position of most U.S. allies in the region, which they held for several decades in the past. However, these kind of cold relations of the allies towards each other were observed in the past as well. During the Arab-Israeli war in 1973, the KSA used its “oil weapon”, greatly reducing energy supplies to Western countries. In addition, Turkey did not cooperate with NATO at the time of the Greek-Turkish dispute over Cyprus. At the same time, the KSA and Turkey depend financially, economically, politically and militarily on the U.S. and the West. The U.S. is the guarantor of the stability of the KSA and CCASG member states, both in terms of a possible confrontation involving the Iranian threat and the fight against anti-government Islamist groups. The base of the U.S. Fifth Fleet is situated in Bahrain. Many people from business, political, financial and economic fields, including members of the ruling dynasties of the CCASG countries, have business relations with the United States and the West. Their influence is quite significant, as can be seen, for example, in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain. The current generation of the politicians, business leaders and military elite of the Persian Gulf monarchies have studied in the United States. Moreover, the English language, generally speaking, has become the second official language in the CCASG countries, particularly in Qatar, UAE and Bahrain. That is why, it is difficult to imagine that the KSA will conduct a completely independent policy in the region, or one especially directed against U.S. interests. As for Turkey's rapprochement with China, it is possible, but within certain limits. We believe it will be limited to the economic aspect. There is no vivid reason for Turkey and China's cooperation. This is explained by the fact that they do not have common strategic objectives and have too diverse cultural and historical traditions, ideology and foreign policy priorities.

At the same time, a change in the attitude of the USA towards Iran and Syria does not mean a change of policy or
strategic objectives of the U.S. in the Middle East. Moreover, the pro-Israel lobby in the United States has a predominant influence on American foreign policy. The Israeli prime minister continues to view Iran's nuclear program as a threat for Israel, and the new Iranian president is called "a wolf in sheep's clothing". Regarding Syria, the U.S. government announced that a military strike was only "delayed", and, as historical practice proves, it is not difficult to find some new motive for a military intervention.

Speaking about the strengthening of Russia's position in the region, this is certainly true. However, this success must be developed throughout active steps. At the summit of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council (SEEC), held in October in Minsk, they spoke about the expansion of SEES and Turkey's interest in collaboration. If Russia wants to, she could change the balance of power in the Middle East.

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