Yemen’s Dead End

The recent events in Yemen have demonstrated that this regional conflict, as well as other ones in the territory of the Middle East, was easy to start but difficult to end. The peculiarity of this situation lies in the fact that, unlike Syria, there seems to be a political will among the direct antagonists (Houthi supporters of Saleh and Saudis) to end the conflict, and a clear desire among the great powers – which is rare – to stop this unnecessary war.

Moreover, everything presupposes a positive development of events. Almost all the parties are convinced that the military resolution of the conflict is impossible. Riyadh is interested in a peaceful coexistence as it needs to stop the extremely painful raids by Houthis in its border provinces – Jizan and Najran, and cut the military expenditures, which have exceeded all reasonable limits (more than 200 billion dollars), while the Houthis and their “puppeteer”, the former president of Yemen Ali Abdullah Saleh, have been suffering from an acute humanitarian crisis in the country, a lack of money and the loss of control over the southern and eastern provinces (Aden and Hadhramaut) since the end of 2015.

As we know, the intensive political contacts, which began with a secret meeting between representatives of the Houthis and Saudi leadership in March 2016, led to the beginning of the negotiation process between the internationally recognized government of President Hadi and rebels under the auspices of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General Ould Cheikh Ahmed in Kuwait in April. However, they reached a deadlock by August, and the USA took the initiative. At the meeting between King Salman and the Secretary of State John Kerry on August 25, the USA proposed its own initiative that resulted in the solution of the “quartet” formed at the discretion of Washington in September (the USA, KSA, UAE and the United Kingdom).

Nevertheless, everything was only going smoothly on paper... An air strike (a week after the events, Riyadh explained that it was an error) by the coalition forces at a funeral ceremony in Sanaa on October 8, which resulted in the death of more than 200 people and injury of 500 people from more than a thousand present, again escalated the situation and undermined the chances for the renewal of the negotiating process.

At the same time, the urgent need experienced primarily by Riyadh to end the conflict that is inflicting severe economic damage to the country and considerable damage to its image is pushing its allies, especially the USA, to firmly promote the initiative of the Yemen “quartet” that it sponsors.

What is the essence of the initiative? According to information in the media, it is proposed that the conflict be settled in five steps. At the first stage, Kerry and his allies in the “quartet” propose to create a government of national unity or partnership with the participation of all the interested parties. The second step: The Houthi supporters of Saleh surrender weapons to a third party (not specified). The third step is to guarantee security at the Saudi-Yemen border. Then, it is proposed to conduct presidential elections within a year. Finally, the provisions of Resolution 2216 of the UN Security Council should be implemented.
To be honest, the plan is rather utopian and under-elaborated (unless the media has distorted it). It has a number of gaps and provisions that do not satisfy both parties. Let us briefly consider them. To begin with, the first step proposed is to establish government of national unity, but there is no mention of security assurances for the Houthis and supporters of Saleh. Almost immediately after the government is established, they will have to surrender heavy weapons and remain one-to-one with the anti-Houthis coalition. In fact, the idea is that they will believe Riyadh’s word right after the strike on the Houthi leadership on October 8. Then the Houthis should stop attacks in the Saudi territory. This point does not quite satisfy Saudi Arabia (although it looks like they agree) who believe that the settlement plan should start with this, or these steps should be taken separately as a kind of prelude to the settlement.

However, the Houthis would like to exchange the cessation of the strikes by the Arab coalition on their territory for their discontinuation of invasions on the Saudi territory and attacks on them. This is a separate matter, in fact. There are many other disputable moments. Hence, the question arises. Does the USA really want to stop the war? Aside from the version that the media is distorting the actual situation, the US plan looks as if it should demonstrate US peacefulness and its leading role in resolving the Yemeni conflict, rather than actually creating a framework for a genuine political process. It was the USA that sold weapons and ammunition worth 20 billion dollars to Saudi Arabia in 2016, which were spent on the warfare. The Americans are the major source of information for Riyadh on the “Iran’s interference” in Yemen’s affairs, which has become an actual casus belli for Saudi Arabia, and not the ousting of A. Hadi from power.

Judging from media reports, the plan of Ould Cheikh Ahmed looks more prudent and well-balanced. First, it looks more deeply elaborated and detailed as it includes eight items with a different sequence, but they take into account the parties’ concerns to a greater degree. According to this plan, the parties shall start with the acknowledgement of A. Hadi as “an intermediate President”, and then they shall appoint a consensus Vice-President. After that, prior to the signing of peace treaty, the current Vice-President (appointed by A. Hadi) shall resign. Only after that, the peace treaty shall be signed and a consensus government shall be formed within a month. After that, the Houthis and their allies shall withdraw their forces from Sanaa, Taiz, and Al-Hadid (i.e. only from the territories occupied by them). Then, they shall surrender weapons to a neutral military committee (which is better than to some unclear “third party”). The required amendments should be introduced to the Constitution and elections are to be held under the international surveillance. The plan is clearly a compromise, and the issue regarding the Houthis’ discontinuation of attacks on the Saudi territory is taken out of the context of the entire settlement and included in the issues on the ceasefire, which must be resolved before the start of the political process.

It is clear that such a plan, though it has some disadvantages, may be used as a basis for the conflict settlement. However, the Houthis, incensed by the strike on Sanaa on October 8, met Ould Cheikh Ahmed more than coldly. They organized a demonstration in front of his hotel and accused him of following the lead of the Saudi coalition, and claimed that he could not be regarded as an “honest broker” in general. For the sake of objectivity, it must be said that they have refrained from taking any steps that could derail any consultations at all – namely, by forming their own government.

In addition, an unexpected “spoiler” (a term often used these days) was revealed by A. Hadi, who, it seemed, is under the control of Riyadh. On October 27, the Saudi media reported that he had conducted a meeting with the Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr and Vice President Ali Mohsen Saleh (by the way, all of them were appointed by him personally bypassing any conciliation procedures with the other party, and they are not recognized by the Houthi supporters of Saleh) in the palace provided to him by Saudi Arabia in the Saudi capital. At the meeting, he presented a rock-solid position stating that he only recognized settlement options based on the peaceful initiative of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, the results of the national dialogue, and Resolution 22016 of the UN Security Council, which required the withdrawal of the Houthis from all major cities, and their surrender of weapons. In other words, he has refused the stage-by-stage and well-balanced approach to the implementation of international solutions proposed by the Special Representative of the UN General Secretary.

It is clear that this position held by the parties and especially by A. Hadi (the tail has started wagging the dog!) is leading the settlement process into a deadlock. There’s no time to be lost though. The humanitarian situation in Yemen is deteriorating, while further military operations are leading to increased numbers of victims and suffering among the civilian population. The USA and its allies that have taken the initiative to regulate the conflict should prove that they are truly committed to peace, and not just playing behind-the-scenes games in order to prolong the conflict and make military and political gains from it.
Outlook.”