Arab Spring: an end to this eastern tale?

After its triumphant start in 2011-2012, recently the “flagship” of the Arab uprisings, the Islamic movement Muslim Brotherhood, sponsored by Qatar, has been losing ground practically in the entire region, which, in fact, is the first sign of decay of the once promising oriental tale called the Arab Spring.

At first, there was Libya, where a block of Islamist parties lost to the union of secular political forces in the country in parliamentary elections in 2012. After that, there was the failure in Mali, where France has managed to prevent the formation of the independent Islamic state Azavad headed by the odious pro-Qatar group Ansar al-Din in the northern part of the country.

Then the failure in Syria and the military coup in Egypt, which was followed by a ban of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country, seem to have finally knocked down the main “ringleaders” of the Islamist integration project in the region.

As a result, last autumn, the until recently “irreconcilable” Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Khalifa Al Thani sent a sensational proposal to President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar al-Assad for the restoration of diplomatic relations between Doha and Damascus, which were broken on the initiative of Qatar after fighting erupted in Syria.

The Qatari regime has always been characterized by a keen political instinct. Apparently, Doha was ready to continue sponsoring “revolutions”, even despite its unsuccessful struggle against the excessive ambitions of France in the region of the European southern neighborhood and political problems in Qatar. However, the change in U.S. Middle East policy priorities, primarily the rapprochement between Washington and Tehran, was a signal for retreat.

Of course, the White House can be understood. The improvement of relations with Tehran will allow Barack Obama to use Iran as a counterweight to the potential growth of influence of the Taliban after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

In addition, it will allow the current U.S. leader to finally get rid of the policy of the neoconservatives that called for the “democratization of the Greater Middle East”, which Obama inherited from the previous administration, and to concentrate on solving domestic problems.

However, while the more flexible Qatar has “figured out” the situation, another sponsor of the Arab Spring, the slow “gerontocratic” Saudi regime seems to have failed to catch the new geopolitical trends. Therefore, it now faces a difficult choice: either continue sticking to its line stubbornly, expressing its dissatisfaction with the “treacherous policy” of its recent key transatlantic ally at every opportunity, or, like Doha, to accept the role of the “extras” in the new U.S. Middle East scenario.

For the present, it is apparent that stubbornness prevails. In particular, this fact is evidenced by the story of Riyadh’s refusal from becoming a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.
In addition, the statement of the head of Saudi intelligence Prince Bandar bin Sultan, during a meeting with Western diplomats, is eloquent in this respect. He said that his country would soon “significantly change its foreign policies”, reconsidering its relations with the United States. One of the most influential people in the CSA explained this decision by the differences in approaches to the key Middle East issues. First of all, it concerns the Syrian issue, where the White House decided to refrain from using radical methods, having finally realized that the current Syrian regime might be replaced by insane Islamist groups.

Moreover, in particular, the Saudis were irritated by the process of normalization of relations between the USA and Iran, which is the main rival of the CSA in the region. This process began in the second half of last year.

Of course, Riyadh is hoping that the friendship between Washington and Tehran would be a temporary phenomenon, and soon everything would return to normal. However, every day they are starting to understand more and more that the current U.S. leadership has really lost interest in the Arab Spring project, and the Americans seem to have decided to go the other way – and concentrate on the “big anti-China game”.

This means that the Wahhabi Project, which was started with the Tunisian-Egyptian “blitzkrieg” in late 2010 – early 2011, is now in a stage of decay. This project had aimed at the integration of the “Arab oecumene” under the auspices of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf (primarily Qatar and Saudi Arabia) by subjugating moderately strict, paramilitary, authoritarian secular regimes, primarily in Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia.

Having actually turned the Arab League into the “executive authority” of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf at the stage of the most “revolutionary” enthusiasm, Doha and Riyadh have failed to create an integration backbone for the future “Arab EU” from out of all this.

The clash of geopolitical interests with France in North Africa, changes in the regional appetites of U.S. foreign policy, and finally the “betrayal” of Qatar, followed by rapid cooling of relations between Doha and Riyadh have resulted in the fact that now Saudi Arabia remains, in reality, the only country that still stubbornly promotes the idea of the Arab Spring.

Obviously, Riyadh still hopes that the current pro-Iranian sentiment will soon blow over in Washington. Otherwise, it would have to place its hopes that the Arab Spring project will become of interest to the new occupant of the White House.

*Vitaly Bilan, PhD in history, an expert on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*