Prince Bandar and Saudi passions

On February 9–16, the Interior Minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, paid an official visit to Washington. In the U.S. capital, he held numerous talks with almost all the representative of the U.S. Administration – with the leadership of the State Department, the CIA, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Security. It is curious that the meeting took place on the territory of the Saudi Arabian Embassy, and therefore had a rather closed character.

It is worth paying attention not to the visit – such trips by Mohammed bin Nayef have been made before as well – but now what is important is the timing of this visit and the topic of the discussions. People are, at least, familiar with Saudi policy, and we know that, until recently, Mohammed bin Nayef, in addition to matters of internal security of the kingdom, also oversaw the Bahraini and Yemeni dossier, formally under the responsibility of the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Saud al-Faisal.

Despite the apparent divisiveness of such distribution of responsibilities, looking from Riyadh, it seemed logical, since Shiites, living in Bahrain and being the source of the internal crisis in that country, also live in Saudi Arabia, where they constitute 15% of the population. The same is the situation with hectic Yemen. Even back in the 1920s, king and founder of the current Saudi dynasty, Abdelaziz, joined the northern mountainous Yemeni lands to Saudi Arabia. That is why everything that happens in Yemen – this country has been in a permanent crisis in recent years – has the most direct impact on the situation in Saudi Arabia, its security and stability, representing an aspect of its domestic policy.

However, during his last visit to Washington, Mohammed bin Nayef, as numerous Saudi media report, discussed with U.S. allies not only the problems connected with the situation in Bahrain and Yemen. They spoke about a much wider range of issues, which included the anti-terrorist theme and most importantly – the situation in Syria. This is already something new, as until recently, this area was in the exclusive competence of the head of the National Security Council of Saudi Arabia (NSC), Director of the General Intelligence Service (GIS), Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the man so close to a variety of Republican administrations in the U.S.A. (he worked as the Saudi ambassador in Washington for a long time) that he even received the nickname of Bandar Bush.

What happened? Why was Prince Bandar bin Sultan – architect, planner and chief executive of Saudi politics in the Syrian direction, the closest friend of the American establishment removed from discussions on the Syrian conflict? This question does not have a clear answer. However, it is clear that his non-participation in Mohammed bin Nayef's visit and discussions with representatives of the Americans responsible for the Syrian problem, suggests that he is not being considered as an important political figure in recent months. This fact was emphasized by the London online edition of Al-Arab on February 13.

It emphasized that the political weight of Bandar has seriously declined. This was already noticeable last fall, after his harsh accusations of betrayal by the U.S.A. This statement of his had a negative impact on the allied U.S.-Saudi relations. As many Arab magazines and newspapers say, the weak, but still taking decisions Saudi Arabian King Abdullah, is extremely dissatisfied with Bandar, as well as with some other Saudi leaders (Turki al-Faisal and bin Nawwaf). These men, together with the head of General Intelligence Service and National Security Council started accusing Washington of actually casting Saudi Arabia adrift, having gone onto a rapprochement path with Iran and refusing to attack the Assad regime in September 2013.

This version deserves attention, of course, as apparently, there is some truth to it. However, the reality is much more serious. Disputes between the allies U.S.A. and Saudi Arabia happened before as well – it is necessary to just recall
the oil embargo of 1973. However, these arguments, full of loud reproaches, always ended peacefully, because Saudi Arabia is not ready and is not able to give up its reliance on the U.S.A., as the latter is the only indispensable guarantor of its stability today.

The true reason that Prince Bandar had fallen into disgrace, and, as they say, not only the king, but also other leading royal princes, is that he proposed a foreign policy to Saudi Arabia, having been influenced by some U.S. (most likely, neocon) circles, that brought it to bankruptcy. If we do not take into account the overthrow of President Mursi, that Bandar contributed to (this was a homegrown Saudi decision), on the other politico-military operations, in which during the “Arab Revolutions” Saudi Arabia recklessly became involved, the situation is dramatic. Despite all of Prince Bandar’s efforts, Riyadh failed to fulfil the primary objective – to overthrow Bashar al-Assad’s regime and thereby break the “Shiite Arch”.

The Free Syrian Army, on which Saudi Arabia and the Americans had placed many hopes, demonstrated its incompetency, and after attacks by the notorious Islamists from Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in autumn 2013, it was almost completely destroyed and is now in the reformation stage. Under these conditions, Bandar had to reorganize the troops and fighters, and rely on highly questionable points of view, in terms of norms of democracy. He now appears to speak for the “Islamic Front” in Syria, composed of disparate Islamic “brigades”.

In order not to discredit himself as an advocate of terrorism, in the autumn of 2013, all units controlled by Bandar declared war on Dzhabhat en-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) thugs, which openly state their goal as creating a terrorist Islamic caliphate on the territory of these two states. The situation was not saved and he was accused of having Saudi Arabia support extremists. At the same time, there began a war among these groups in the Islamic Front (to Assad’s great delight). Islamists had less time to solve the main task posed by their sponsors – the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. Ultimately, this all simply contributed to the further spread of radical Islam and the appearance of quasi-territorial entities with extremist goals in Syria and neighboring countries.

Bandar had an equally disastrous policy in the Lebanese and Iraqi directions. After the loss of the stronghold on the Lebanese-Syrian border (Quseir) last year in June, the weapons and money supply through Lebanon to Assad’s opponents ceased. Now they are basically going through Yabrud in the Kalamuna Mountains, but these actions of theirs will cease too, as the Syrian Regular Army has already taken this city under control.

Saad Hariri, main ally of Saudis in Lebanon and money and weapons supplier to the Syrian rebels, is in isolation in the political arena and never appears on the political arena of the country, spending his life between Paris and Riyadh, where he is now, although he is the head of the Lebanese Sunni block Mustaqbal.

In Iraq, the situation for Saudi foreign policy planners is depressing as well. For some reason, believing the current Prime Minister of Iraq, N.al-Maliki to be an enemy and Iranian agent (which he is not), the Saudis, especially Prince Bandar, provided military and financial aid to disparate Sunni groups in Iraq. These groups eventually ended up in the same camp with the Islamic revolutionary terrorists from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, who went on to capture the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar Province. Thus, the Iraqi government was forced to begin a large-scale military operation against them, where Saudi Arabia’s supply of money and weapons was discovered.

Futility and hopelessness of this regional policy, which was promoted by Prince Bandar, became obvious to all senior military and political leaders of Saudi Arabia in January-February of this year. Naturally, they could not blame themselves (because this was a joint decision) and so they found a “scapegoat” – Bandar, as the head and executor of the Saudi monarch’s orders in these matters. Thus, Bandar’s accusations against White House policy became a convenient excuse.

Bandar’s situation, as many political scientists say, is so bad, that on the websites of some agencies there are reports about his resignation. The next few days will show whether this is true or not, but it is clear that the Prince has very few defenders in Saudi Arabia today. And it is not just the fact that both the royal clans (Shammar and Sudairy), sharing the real power in the kingdom, have little sympathy for the Half-Blood Prince: Bandar’s foreign adventure is clearly superfluous at the new development stage of KSA. The king does not need him. He previously used Bandar as a tool to ensure a balance between the different clans within the ruling elite. Now, there are some reports, according to which, the key clans have agreed on a scheme of power transference from the weak and sick King to his son Metibu.

The deal has a backstage character, but we already know that the trappings of continuity will be maintained. In other words, the current Crown Prince Salman, as it is expected, after the death of King Abdullah, will get the throne, and in the case of declaration of his incapacity, he will become a regent (as it was in 1995 with King Fahd,
but later Abdullah became a de facto regent). The major powers will be, in fact, concentrated in the hands of the present king’s son – Prince Meteba whereas the Sudairy clan (headed by its formal and Crown Prince Salman) previously resisting, will support him (Meteba) in exchange for the preservation of some key positions in Sudairy hands (referring to him and Mohammed bin Nayef), including the post of Interior Minister.

However, the new configuration of power obviously suggests a new policy. Judging by the actions of the Saudi authorities, this policy means the withdrawal of all Saudi Mujahedeen from Syria, the rejection of the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad’s regime (the slogan calling for his dismissal, of course, will remain), the establishment of a more or less intelligible dialogue with Iran. This development of events is confirmed by the recently approved anti-terrorism decree of the king, providing for strict punishment of his people involved in military operations in third countries (from 1,500 to 2,000 Saudis are fighting in Syria).

This may explain, in the same way, the Saudi consent for the formation of the Council of Ministers in Lebanon with the Hezbollah on February 16 (March 14 block). This action was possible after Saad Hariri took out the requirement of his Al-Mustaqbal block about the withdrawal of the Hezbollah from Syria as a condition of consent for the establishment of a new cabinet.

Another argument for Riyadh’s different behavior may be the revival of contacts between the representatives of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Former chief of the General Intelligence Service, Turki al Faisal, in January in Davos, had a brief conversation with the President of Iran, H. Ruhani. On February 4, the new Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, I. Madani, traveled to Tehran (only Iranian electronic media reported this). There are some articles that mention the expected visit of the Foreign Minister of Iran, M. Zarifa, to Riyadh.

This information proves that Saudi Arabia seems to have finally realized the fatality of betting on jihadists and other Islamic radicals as a tool to achieve its foreign policy goals in the region, and they are reluctantly removing from the chessboard the unnecessary figure of Prince Bandar.

Does this mean that Bandar, holding in his hands numerous accounts of the royal family, has surrendered? - Of course, he has not. It is not in his nature as a political fighter, analyst and a man of great personal charisma. He continues to wage a desperate struggle for power, although it has slipped out of his hands. Moreover, most importantly – he is doing everything in order to prove the correctness of his chosen course. To do this, he needs to convince the royal family, that the military solution, in solving the conflict in Syria, is still relevant. Therefore, he actively involves numerous levers of political influence in Washington, especially in the Republican Party, as well as the Israel lobby. He can change the course of events if it turns out that the “reset” of Washington’s relations with Iran are not working. Thus, it is necessary to force Iran to return to hard bargaining on the Iranian nuclear program. For the first stage, it would be enough if the Syrian official delegation at the Geneva talks were to simply “slam the door” and walk away.

To disrupt the political process in Syria, leading to futility of GIS head's operations, it is necessary to change the balance of military forces on the battlefield in Syria. Bandar has a 40,000-jihadist group in Jordan, prepared with the help of American trainers for this purpose. The reality of this scenario is emphasized by some media reporters. They say that on 18 February the rebels have announced an attack on the government forces in Deraa (in the south of Syria, on the border with Jordan) this spring.

However, the chances of such an outcome remain small, as the major world players in the region, such as the U.S.A., Russia, Iran are working on a de-escalation process. The Iranians showed their readiness to work in this direction, by supporting the new formula of forming the government in Lebanon. Moreover, they hinted to the Hezbollah to give up the formula 9+9+6. The leader of the Shiite movement, H. Nasralla urged regional parties to stop the war in Syria. It seems that Tehran will act in the same way in other areas, demonstrating pragmatism, and a willingness to look for solutions.

As for the rulers in Riyadh, they seem to have nothing to do but to integrate into the new trends, because otherwise they may await the next Arab revolution...

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