Any chances for Mohammed bin Salman to retain power?

The state visit of the King of Saudi Arabia, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, to Russia on October 4-8, 2017 had a profoundly symbolic meaning. Its importance goes beyond the scope of the economic and investment agreements signed during his visit, which are insignificant when compared with the relations of Riyadh with other powerful states. The commodity turnover with the USA exceeds that with Russia 330 times (!).

The agreements that were reached largely dealt with the long-term development of the relations between the two countries. Speaking figuratively, we are talking about the launch of a long-range missile, with the entire visit acting as the first stage of such a missile. And this stage is separable. I shall explain what this means.

King Salman is very advanced in age (81 years old). Although, in modern times, this cannot be considered the age limit for being in power, the leader is seriously ill, a fact that was brought to light during the escalator-malfunction incident in Moscow at his arrival. The King moves with difficulties; he has had a stroke and, according to some malicious reports from the foggy Albion, he is also suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The King himself understands this, and for the last two years has been vigorously preparing his son Mohammed for the ascension to the throne.

The events of June this year demonstrated that Al Saud is ready to go to any lengths for this purpose. He has already rallied the support of his allies in the Sudairi clan and achieved his goal when the US protege, who had already received the approval to govern in December 2014 shortly before the death of King Abdullah (he was accepted in Washington by the leaders of all key departments, as well as by the President), refused the position of the Crown Prince and stepped aside for Prince Mohammed.

Even until now, since January 2015, the young, energetic and very able-bodied Prince Mohammed has already concentrated tremendous powers in his hands, including the position of Defense Minister, Head of the social and economic bloc of the government, as well as control over the main source of the Kingdom’s income - the Saudi Aramco Company acquired in autumn of the same year.

By the autumn of 2017, all the external obstacles to obtaining full, absolute and legitimate powers in terms of the
Saudi legislation had been eliminated. All pretenders to the throne - the former heir to the Crown Prince and the son of King Abdulaziz, Prince Muqrin, and, as we have mentioned above, Mohammed bin Nayef (the nephew of the founding King, the son of the Head of the Interior Ministry, Prince Nayef, who died in 2011) - formally renounced claims to the throne. The son of King Abdullah, Prince Mutaib, who heads the National Guard, has a power resource but does not enjoy the support of the main royal clan - the Sudairi. The surviving sons of the founding King (except Muqrin), such as Prince Ahmed, all have the rights to the throne, but they cannot secure sufficient support within the Saudi royal family, have no power component, and at the best case have the support of the conservative clergy who has already felt the winds of change and understands that Prince Mohammed's reform plans may weaken his position in the society.

In addition, over the last two years, the new Crown Prince has almost completely cleared the state apparatus from representatives of the royal families (except for the governor's corps), giving those honourable but powerless positions in the Royal Office and in the Council of Shura, where they are under close supervision. He appointed his proteges among the young technocrats and businessmen at the key positions, including in the Royal Office, where a compact shadow cabinet operates.

The worst thing for the numerous opponents of Prince Mohammed and his policy (there are many of them in Al Saud family) is not only the fact that they are poorly consolidated, and do not have powerful administrative or power tools to influence the situation, but also that they have no plans to answer all the numerous challenges faced by the Kingdom (oil dependence at low prices for raw materials, youth unemployment, underdevelopment of modern state institutions, etc.)

Meanwhile, Prince Mohammed is full of ideas. The first of these is the "Vision 2030" plan, which explains in detail how the country will abandon its dependence on oil and turn into an industrial economy, even with reliance on foreign workers. It is clear that this plan is faced with the extremely low efficiency of the state machinery, which has always been considered a sinecure for the offspring of rich and not very wealthy families, but also for the institutional constraints. It clearly implies a radical breakdown of the tribal system, the rejection of the outdated dogmas of Wahhabism and the more secular nature of the state, which has been proved by the abolition of the ban on female driving in early October. Soon, there will be a repeal of the ban on entertainment – cinemas, theatres, concerts, exhibitions, and the opening of the country to tourists. Mohammed bin Nayef has tried to oppose the changes by limiting the reform of the Council of Muftis and promoting the introduction of the tourist visa. Now, this obstacle no longer exists!

Thus, the opponents of Prince Mohammed have no legal means to prevent his accession to the throne, which can take place in the coming months. Everyone who is dissatisfied, including the members of the Sudairi clan who are outraged by the departure from the principle of transferring power from brother to brother and the conservative forces relying on the clergy and believing that the young prince has gone too far in destroying the patriarchal foundations, obviously lacks a resource.

In fact, they have only one tool – the physical neutralization of the young Prince, as the case was in 1975 when one of the royal family members killed King Faisal who had dared declare an oil embargo for the West. As it was before, and now, the opponents of the young prince can rely on support from outside. Washington has perceived the visit of King Salman to Moscow with artificial indifference. But it understands that the further development of the situation may not be in accordance with the US plan, when Riyadh will stop blindly following the instructions of the American power centres due to the reforms conducted by the young Prince, and (God forbid) will become closer to the disobedient "Vlad". This is very dangerous, as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the major influence tool – alongside with Israel – on the situation in the Arab, and even Muslim, world, without mentioning that it is the main buyer of the American weapons in the world.

Washington will therefore take the easy route of either provoking an attempt on Mohammed bin Salman or orchestrating another version of the "Arab spring", say, in the form of a palace coup. The first assassination attempt in August this year failed. It was followed by severe repressions and arrests, which affected some of the members of the royal family. The second "tendril of fear" was the attack on the royal palace in Jiddah during the entire visit of the King to Moscow. At present, the Prince may expect new attacks and provocative acts against the new role of Riyadh that the USA is not used to.

Who will the USA put its stakes on: the old Prince Ahmed? Or the insulted and offended Head of the National Guard Mutaib? On Prince Muqrin, who has lost his position? Or will it stir up Islamic State, which is already weakening and losing its positions in Syria and Iraq, against Saudi Arabia? In any case, Prince Mohammed should be on the alert,
and the rest should remember that by placing a bet on someone from the royal family, the USA is concerned not about Saudi interests, but their own, and, if necessary, they will proceed with the partitioning of this country along the lines of Ralph Peter’s map, as has already happened with Iraq.

In other words, the USA is ceasing to be the main guarantor of the security of the Saudi monarchy, but instead, is becoming its greatest threat. Prince Mohammed should remember this very fact every minute.

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