A military delegation of high-ranking officers from Saudi Arabia and the UAE recently visited a Kurdish SDF base in Aïn al-Arab (Kobani) on the Syrian border with Turkey. They discussed practical questions connected with replacing the US military presence there with troops from several Arab nations, who would represent the League of Arab States. There is also the question of replacing the SDF troops in the Arab part of the areas in eastern Syria now occupied by the Kurds. This problem has already become acute, as residents of the Arab cities in eastern Syria frequently demonstrate against the presence of armed Kurdish groups there. In particular, there is very serious unrest in Raqqa. Bringing Arab forces into the region may help to stabilize the situation, and so a decision will be made on this question in the near future. Against that background, there are reports that three-party talks are to be held between the USA, Jordan and Russia on the question of the de-escalation Zone in Daraa. If Moscow guarantees the complete withdrawal of pro-Iranian Shi’ite armed groups from the south of Syria, then the Americans will be ready to transfer that de-escalation zone in the south-west of Syria, including even the Al-Tanf border crossing near the Jordanian border in the south of Syria. The USA’s goal in these talks and meetings is to drive a wedge between Russia and Iran, and encircle Iran with enemies to ensure that it has no possible allies. As part of that encirclement, Turkey would gain control over Manbij and Russia would gain control over the South of Syria.
It seems likely the Kurds, supported by the USA and the Arab coalition led by the League of Arab States, will disperse from the east, and from the Iranian mercenaries’ supply lines along the Euphrates. That is why the Kurdish groups need to give up their zone of control in the Arab part of eastern Syria and regroup in the south-east, from where an offensive will be launched against the supply lines of Iran’s proxy-forces. A date for the launch of the attack on the Iranian positions in Syria has already been penciled in: 15-17 July, immediately after the end of Ramadan. The date may be changed, it is true, but that is the timescale that all the talks are structured around.

The USA has responded to the interview given by Bashar al-Assad on May 31, in which he threatened to attack the Kurds’ positions, by warning him that it could not accept any such attempt. In principle that statement was probably just an attempt to pacify Israel and the Arab members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, as any attack, however half-hearted, launched from the Iranian occupied zone on the left bank of the Euphrates would be met with a swift and harsh military response.

Having said that, Al-Riyadh and Abu-Dhabi, far from limiting their attacks on Iranian troops in Syria, have actually increased them, despite their ongoing military involvement in Yemen. The UAE and Saudi Arabia recently asked the USA to help them seize the key Yemeni port of Al Hudaydah, from the Houthi rebels (Yemeni Shi’ites) who currently control it. In particular, they want access to intelligence obtained by American drones. Most of all, Al-Riyadh and Abu-Dhabi want Washington to commit itself to directly military intervention in the war in Yemen.

The US President’s Executive Office is considering various possible responses to their request for direct military support in Yemen. According to the Wall Street Journal, they want help in capturing the port of Al Hudaydah, which accounts for 80% of all cargo—whether commercial or humanitarian—imported into the country. The Saudis regularly accuse Iran of blocking the port so it can secretly supply missiles to the rebels. In any event, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have promised the White House that they will not attempt to capture the port until they have obtained US support. However, President Trump is clearly unwilling to get directly involved in yet another conflict in the region before the problem of the Iranian military presence in Syria and Iraq has been resolved. So far, however, it is difficult to predict exactly what Washington’s decision will be.

In their attempts to resolve the “Iranian issue”, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are also talking to Russia, as they understand that Russia’s position has an important influence on Iran’s actions in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. On June 1, President Vladimir Putin received Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who is both the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the UAE Minister of Defense, in the Kremlin. At the political level, the visit was devoted to the issue of regulating the Syrian crisis. First of all, in the Iran aspect of the problem, as the Emirates, as far as foreign policy is concerned, are obliged to follow the Saudi lead.

The most recent events have caused the situation in the region to change rapidly. The confrontation between Israel and Iran has assumed a dominant role in the “game” being played out by the major world and regional powers in Syria. This has expanded the scope of the conflict. Abu Dhabi is trying to work out how best to act in this situation, as maintaining its good relationship with Iran is one of its foreign policy priorities. Russia also wants to prevent a new conflict breaking out in Syria with Israel, supported by the USA, on one side, and an alliance of pro-Iranian Shi’ites, Hezbollah, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards on the other side. This is particularly important as no party has any real influence over either Israel or Iran. In any event, it is clear that a new phase in the war in Syria is approaching, and that it will involve Iran and Israel, either directly or indirectly.

As for Al-Riyadh, it has resorted to threatening Moscow, not directly, but through Qatar, which is, after Iran, the main adversary of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Not long ago Saudi Arabia threatened Doha with force if it bought 3PC C-400 systems from Russia. The Saudi leadership has asked the French President, Emmanuel Macron, to put pressure on Qatar so as to prevent the purchase from going ahead. According to the Saudi communication to Paris, if Doha decides to buy the C-400 systems then Al-Riyadh is ready to take all the necessary measures, including “military action”, to destroy them on the territory of its neighboring state. The Qatars themselves have, to a great extent, provoked the threats made by Saudi Arabia in its message to France: the Qatari ambassador to Moscow, Fahad bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah, said in an interview with TASS that Doha was interested in buying the C-400 systems. “The talks are at an advanced stage”, he said.

That is despite the fact that Saudi Arabia also wishes to buy C-400 systems, and Moscow has already signed contracts for the sale with Al-Riyadh, as Vladimir Kozhin, Russian presidential aide on military-technical cooperation, said this February in an interview with the newspaper Kommersant. Doha should avoid provoking Al-Riyadh with loud declarations once too often, as the latter, along with a number of other Arab states, including the OAE and Egypt, is following a policy of blockading Qatar: it has broken of all relations with the country and has
introduced economic sanctions against it, which it claims are in response to (among other things) Doha’s close collaboration with Tehran, which is against the interests of the Gulf Cooperation Council. One of the conditions for lifting the blockade of Qatar is that the latter break off its close relationship with Tehran.

Given this far from simple situation, some of America’s other allies have launched military actions against Iranian positions in Syria, under the pretext of fighting DAESH terrorists. According to the American Lieutenant General Paul Funk, commander of the coalition forces taking part in Operation Inherent Resolve against DAESH in Iraq and Syria, on June 3 SDF forces, supported by the USA, took part in the liquidation of one of the terrorist organization’s centers of resistance in Al-Hasakah Province, in the north-east of Syria. He said that the SDF groups will be helped by Iraqi forces, who will launch artillery strikes against terrorist positions from their side of the border. The border has also been strengthened in order to “prevent militants from move from Syria to Iraq”, he added. In general, that scenario could have been predicted, as it is in line with the USA’s interests, in particular the achievement of its goal of creating alternative military and political authorities, independent of Damascus, in the area east of the Euphrates, and then liquidating the Iranian military presence in that region, which protects the Euphrates Corridor, the supply route for Iranian and pro-Iranian forces in Syria.

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