Barack Obama's Visit to Saudi Arabia: Ripples on the Water

The United States President’s first visit in five years to Saudi Arabia on March 28 evoked only one feeling in the international community: perplexity.

In the week following his one-day visit to the land of dates and petroleum, no one in Riyadh or Washington was able to explain exactly why the superpower's leader went to such a regionally important nation in the Middle East and what business was conducted. Did the head of the world's most powerful nation not have anything more important to do than demonstrate his friendly feelings towards the Patriarch of the Middle Eastern monarchs? For this he cast aside Europe, tormented by Shakespearian doubts over Russia “after Crimea,” and went to comfort Saudi Sheikhs worried about the intimacy between the USA and Iran?

Other than an unconvincing statements about maintaining a strategic partnership and "friendly relationship," global public opinion has learned nothing of this visit, which was puzzling in every sense of the word. True, some things were revealed in Alexander Orlov's recent article for "New Eastern Outlook", but there have been new developments.

We won't conjecture but rather appeal to the facts, namely, certain actions of the USA's allies immediately following the conclusion of the visit which, it would appear, allow us to raise the curtain of secrecy surrounding this trip. On April 1 (ah, there it is, English humor!), that is, three days after Obama's departure from Riyadh, Washington's faithful henchman, British Prime Minister David Cameron, ordered an investigation into activities of the Society of Muslim Brothers (The Muslim Brotherhood) due concerns about its alleged links to violent extremism.

This would appear to have no connection to Saudi Arabia and Obama’s visit there, but only at first glance. Consider this: the report on this subject for the British Prime Minister should be prepared by none other than Her Majesty's Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador to Riyadh, Sir John Jenkins. Where is the Muslim Brotherhood and where is Sir Jenkins?

Odd, isn't it? But in fact what happened has its own cast-iron logic and it is by no means linked to the fact that the fluent-in-Arabic Sir John Jenkins used to work in the Holy Land and dealt with Hamas - the Palestinian branch of the Society of Muslim Brothers - though this is also important.

The logic is first of all based on a sort of reassessment of values currently taking place in Riyadh. After crushing failures in the attempted overthrows of the Assad regime and the inability, at least for now, to undermine the position of Iraq's pro-Iranian Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (the results of the April elections will reveal whether his opponents are able to remove him from power), and, most importantly, after the USA's refusal in the fall of 2013 to use military force in Syria and their tying of political dialogue with Iran outside the framework of the Institute of Nuclear Problems' discussions, it's become clear to the Saudi rulers that they need to think more about themselves.

And in general, Riyadh should really ask itself a sober question: "What will happen to us?" Washington is increasingly concerned with other problems (how to answer Russia “for Crimea” and what to do with China) and thus
the strategic link made by the Saudi Arabian founder and King Abdulaziz and Franklin Delano Roosevelt on board the "Quincy" in 1945 has been entirely suspended. Let's recall that the US President's ship, then anchored at Jeddah on its way back from the Yalta Conference, was visited by the first Saudi Monarch. He agreed with the head of one of World War II's victorious powers that Washington should provide the then-young Saudi Kingdom with security in exchange for access to the vast oil wealth of Saudi Arabia.

Of course, it's impossible to base all the problems in the relations between the USA and Saudi Arabia on the immediate needs of a political moment. The value of Riyadh for Washington began to decrease long ago. By 2014, diversification of oil sources has made the Kingdom but one of many suppliers to the USA which export no more than 12-15% America's total hydrocarbon imports. Commodity trade, although it rests at an impressive figure of about 80 billion dollars, is no longer critical to Washington.

No, the importance of the country for American politics has not disappeared; it remains a "regional policeman" to guard American interests, put pressure on rebellious Tehran and regularly buy weapons at massive sums (the total of contracts in recent years is 65 billion dollars) equal to the budgets of major European powers. But, overstrained by numerous military ventures, Washington is no longer ready to maintain its previous level of obligations to the countries of the region, including Saudi Arabia, though its triad of challenges in the Near East (the free supply of hydrocarbons, the security of Israel and the prevention of other regional power centers) haven't gone anywhere.

Riyadh, which has done everything to fulfill Washington's previous aims, now feels cheated as it watches the USA gradually distance itself from the affairs of the region and begin dialogues with those it had once harshly suppressed. But it, as evidenced by the complete silence of the Saudi media after the American president's visit, lacks the common sense to understand that it can no longer fundamentally change the strategic drift of the weary superpower. In the best case, Riyadh can only slow it down.

And so we must seek help from the White House in addressing the most pragmatic objectives which would enable the Saudi monarchy to survive in the new and changing world.

Among these primary objectives is the eradication of the Muslim Brotherhood from the whole of the Middle East because that is what Riyadh now considers the major threat to the Kingdom, not Iran. According to the ruling family, the Muslim Brotherhood is a presents itself as a dangerous competitor with a combination of its ideology of extremism, terrorism and populism that's mixed with slogans of electoral democracy in full political cynicism and the desire to monopolize power in all Arab countries at any cost.

It would seem it was precisely this truth that King Abdullah proved to the American president. The Saudis themselves considered themselves well-prepared for the talks with him: on March 8, the ABM announced in Saudi Arabia, as well as in the UAE, outside of the law, that the Egyptian president Morsi was overthrown in July 2013 not without their help, and on March 24, "as a warning" and much to the delight of the Saudis, the Egyptian court in the city of Minya, after just two days of hearings, made the unprecedented decision to execute 529 "Muslim Brothers."

On March 5 of this year, Riyadh attempted to isolate, at least out of the CCASG countries, Qatar (from which the KSA, UAE and Bahrain have recalled their ambassadors), which sponsors Muslim Brothers around the world, and relations with Turkey, headed by Recep Tayip Erdogan, a member of the Brotherhood, have been seriously "frozen." As written in the March 29 issue of "The Economist" in an article titled "Awkward Relations," "...Saudi officials [were quoted] as saying that the kingdom spent $25 billion subsidizing such allies as Jordan, Pakistan and Bahrain in 2012, and expects to spend more, now that Egypt has become a prime recipient of such largesse." And all for one reason: to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from rising to power in these neighboring countries.

But at the time of the Saudi monarch's meeting with Obama, the main obstacle to the realization of Saudi plans remained the position of Washington, whose shadow looms over the "Arab Spring" in the region. At the beginning of the 2000s, it was precisely the USA which, at the prompting of its faithful ally in London, gambled on the Society of Muslim Brothers as a promising force which would be able to keep control of the Arab nations during this "transitional period" while the USA dealt with other issues, such as the normalization of relations with Tehran. The waters were first tested (after Erdogan's 2002 victory in Turkey) when the Brotherhood came to power in Gaza in 2006. This could not have happened without the consent of Washington and Tel-Aviv.

And this is where the parties' interests diverge, and they diverge dramatically. Riyadh fully logically proves to Washington that you cannot simultaneously bet on it and its worst enemies, who, it says, have already proven themselves incompetent and harmful to the region, and that Saudi Arabia would be able to protect Washington's interests much more effectively. And, having overthrown Morsi with the help of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, as "The
International New York Times" wrote on March 28, seriously "undercut" US ambitions. All of the White House's requests to Riyadh to mitigate the repression of the Brotherhood in Egypt remain unanswered.

As for whether King Abdullah convinced the American president of the need to completely abandon faith in the Brotherhood during their two-hour conversation, only time will tell. For the moment, considering the statement from Downing Street (if it's not an April Fool's joke), one thing is clear: Washington instructed London, which for many years provided the Muslim Brotherhood with a "home away from home" and helped to build their political influence, to "deal" with the issue.

The conclusion one can make from this episode is simple: Washington's Middle East strategy is not just stalling but quite simply racing towards bankruptcy. The strategy has failed on Palestinian/Israeli, Syrian, Iranian and Iraqi issues and doesn't sit well even with the USA's closest allies, who understandably accuse the White House of contradictory directives, an absence of strategy, inconsistency, weakness, endless flip-flopping and an unwillingness to go all the way in supporting its regional allies, who have descended into complete quarreling with one another.

It seems that the only point on which Obama and King Abdullah agree is the strengthening of support of the "moderately armed opposition" in Syria. However, Washington's refusal to provide the opposition with MPADS and heavy arms, including anti-tank weapons, again dooms the region to the failure of both sides, to further bloodshed, and to the expansion of the geographical scope of destabilization and terrorism, for which Syria has become a hotbed thanks to the opposition's sponsors.

Roger Wayne, a British scientist at Harvard University, in his article "The Events in Ukraine and the Middle East Reveal the Helplessness of American Politics," published in the "Al-Hayat" newspaper on April 4, wrote: "If we are to admit that your country is no longer as influential as previously seemed to herself, it means that she must make a firm decision on the implementation of her influence in new ways which are more inventive but more limited, though this is always a difficult road to take. And the best that can be done in this un-American situation is to live these moments as they are instead of thinking about them..."

Indeed, if it's already frightening to America's best friends to think about what's happening, what can be said about America itself...

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