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Saudi Arabia and the future of Yemen

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The protracted war led by the Persian Gulf countries headed by Saudi Arabia in Yemen since March 2015 seemed to be more of a routine since the beginning of this year. The legitimate government recognized by the international community and led by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi dug into Aden. Its troops, supported by the coalition of Anti-Houthi countries, advanced, although slowly, towards the port of Hodeidah with the prospect of an attack on the capital on Yemen – Sana'a. The noose around the rebel forces was being tightened.

It is quite clear that the fall of the strategic port on the Red Sea, through which almost 90% of humanitarian aid flows to Yemenis living in areas controlled by Houthis and supporters of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, would lead to a massive famine and the possible death of millions of Yemenis. It is also clear that the threat of such a scenario occurring was used by the Anti-Houthi coalition in order to force the opposition forces to capitulate to the conditions put out by Riyadh.

Moscow, represented by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs G.M. Gatilov made it clear that such a scenario is totally unacceptable. Speaking in Geneva on April 25 at a high-level donor conference on the conflict in Yemen, G.M. Gatilov called for lifting the blockade of Hodeidah, the opening of the airport in Sana'a and the return to a political resolution of the conflict. "Like most other countries, we firmly believe that the crisis in Yemen should be resolved exclusively through peaceful means by way of a national dialogue that takes into account the interests of all the major political forces in the country," he said.

The position of Russia was immediately appreciated by former President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who responded on April 26 with a speech, in which he thanked Moscow for its principled position. For the first time in the past year, he announced that Yemen is ready to begin a dialogue of peace with its neighbor, Saudi Arabia. Having made this sensational statement, he however did not fail to criticize the Saudi-led coalition for its endless bombardment, the death of peaceful civilians, famine, blockade, and the destruction of Yemen's infrastructure. He mocked the key argument made by Riyadh under which the military campaign against his country has been justified, in particular – that Yemeni territory was allegedly used by Iran to create threats to the security of Saudi Arabia. He added that on the contrary, it is from Saudi territory that the threats emanate against the security of Yemen.

In his speech, Ali Abdullah, Saleh made it clear that the alliance with the Houthis remains strong. He stated that he had rejected proposals to abandon the alliance with them for "hundreds of millions of dollars" and to enter into an alliance with "Muslim brothers" and A. Hadi. In this way he answered the rumors about the supposed weakening of relations with the Houthis with whom certain disagreements were noticed recently, as revealed through the resignation of Abdel-Aziz bin Habtour in April, only six months into his post of Houthi Prime Minister in Sana'a. Disclosing the secrets of Yemeni behind the curtain politics, the former President hinted fairly transparently to the worst enemies of the "Muslim Brothers" – the Emirates – that their partners (apparently referencing Riyadh) are elaborating very dark schemes behind their backs.

However, it seems that apart from an attempt to push the allies of the Anti-Houthi coalition, this strong rhetoric was just a ruse in order to give the Saudis a signal of readiness for peaceful negotiations.

Actually, it was such a turn of affairs that was expected by Moscow, but not by Riyadh as it seems, where the signal was chosen to be ignored, continuing to take stake in a military victory and regarding the extended hand of Ali Abdullah Saleh as a sign of weakness. They still seem to hope to split the alliance of Houthis and Saleh supporters. It would seem that the impetus from Moscow and A.A. Saleh for finding a political settlement began to fade. However, during the last week of April and the first week of May, changes in the Yemeni conflict began to occur that may

call into question the military campaign of the coalition and in general its existence, as well as a movement back towards a political resolution.

A worsening turn of events for A. Hadi and his patrons was evidenced by the last few days in Aden, where on May 4 opponents of the acting President took to the streets and staged a demonstration in support of the former governor of the city and the supporter of separation of the South Yemen from the North – Idris Az-Zubeidi. On the same days separatist supporters from the Al-Hirak invited him to head a Political council to govern the region and lead for independence.

All these actions resulted as a response to the decision of the Yemeni president on April 27 to dismiss Az-Zubeidi (yet another supporter of South Yemen separation) and replace him with his protégé, the Salafi Hani Ben Braik.

It is clear that the liaison, established between the allies of A. Hadi in the south with such difficulty, were being torn apart. They will now have to rely on the Emirates, which according to the “amicable” decision of the Saudi Monarch and the Emirs of the UAE patronized Southern Yemeni leaders in the last two years.

Now managing the situation in the South of the country will become much more difficult. Many of the South Yemeni leaders, for various reasons, are opposed to the federal system of Yemen, fixed to the results of the national dialogue of 2013, and want to separate from the North, with which they have only lived as one state since 1990. The mosaic of political and military movements in the South of Yemen gives little ground for optimism. In addition to the supporters of A. Hadi, the Muslims brothers from the Islah party have been quite active there (who, in spite of the objections of Abu Dhabi, are secretly supported by Riyadh), while in the provinces of Hadhramaut the Al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS have strong positions. The fact that they are using the chaos and war in Yemen was openly touched upon by G.M. Gatilov in Geneva. The resignation of Az-Zubeidi revealed the degree of political instability in the south and has called into question both military strategy of Saudi Arabia to capture Hodeidah and in general the basis of the Anti-Houthi coalition...

Amongst these conditions, the resumption of peace efforts of the UN Secretary General Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed is expected. Nonetheless, against the backdrop of complicated relations between Yemeni parties (Houthis and Saleh supporters, as well as among supporters of A. Hadi and South Yemeni separatists), it is only possible under condition of the full support for actions on the part of both of the direct participants in the conflict, including the SA coalition and the UAE, and the “five” of the UN Security Council.

Much depends on the new American President, D. Trump, who will be going in May on his first foreign trip, including Israel and the Vatican, and will also visit Saudi Arabia (before the NATO summit, scheduled for May 25). Although the Saudi Arabia Minister Adel al-Jubeir marked the fight against extremism and terrorism as the main topic for D. Trump’s talks with his Saudi partners in Jeddah, it is clear that without discussion of the conflict in Yemen it will not be possible. The head of the US administration will have to decide whether to consider the Yemeni conflict, as Saudi rulers will try to convince him, part of the fight against the rising Iran, or

realize that it has its own international reasons and external military intervention, much less a blockade and the famine of civilians, can hardly be a solution.

To do this, he will need a lot of political will, taking into account the fact that the Saudi Arabia is the main US ally in the region which buys US weapons worth fantastic amounts thus providing work for the US military-industrial complex for decades ahead, and the new American President has already advocated for the interests of this industry...
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