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Barack Obama and Saudi Arabia: Behind the Scenes of the Visit

By Igor Pankratenko

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The conversation between the U.S. president and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia did not last very long. The ninety-year-old king walks with the help of a walker; during his meeting with Obama, a respirator was standing by for the monarch in the next room. However, besides the king, the two highest-ranking representatives of the dynasty also took part in the negotiations – Crown Prince Salman and the foreign minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, whose words are sufficient for the making of any decisions in the Kingdom.

Even a brief list of the main points of the agenda speaks of the importance of the meeting: relations with Tehran, changes in the approaches to the civil war and foreign intervention in Syria, future policy with regard to Cairo and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, joint actions in Lebanon, «anti-terrorism» operations in Yemen, the situation in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), and, finally, the question of questions: joint plans with regard to diversifying supplies of energy resources to NATO member countries and agreeing on actions for lowering gas and oil prices.

The official commentary on the visit boils down to assurances of the inviolability of the strategic alliance between America and Arabia. In terms of bilateral sales volumes (52 billion for the first three quarters of 2013), the Saudis are among the top ten most important trade partners of the U.S. Military cooperation between Riyadh and Washington under the 338 contracts currently in force is worth 96.8 billion dollars. The U.S. military contingent has been withdrawn from the

Kingdom, but American instructor and «consultant» missions continue active operation, especially in the security field, in close cooperation with the Saudi Ministry of Internal Affairs, intelligence and anti-terrorism divisions, conducting joint operations in Yemen. Finally, almost 74,000 Saudi students are studying in the U.S.; these are the future executives, whose talent pool, ideology and value systems are established in America.

With such a level of cooperation and intertwinement of capital (U.S. companies have around 400 joint projects with the Saudi dynasty in the Kingdom with a total volume of approximately \$44 billion), there is no question of any serious disagreements between the American establishment and the Saudis. It is more accurate to speak of disagreements between the ruling dynasty and the Obama administration. But here during the visit a serious shift took place, and satisfaction literally oozes between the lines of the official commentaries on the negotiations.

The parties are to maintain the volumes of military and technical cooperation and increase coordination of military intervention in Yemen, the situation in which is a key factor for the security of Saudi Arabia and at the same time a threat to the ruling dynasty. Washington also approved the monarchy's actions in «subduing» Qatar; the mass repressions in Bahrain which, according to the Saudis, is now the front line in resisting Shiite expansion into the countries of the Persian Gulf; and the expansion of Saudi presence in Lebanon for the same «anti-Shiite» (read: anti-Iran) purposes.

However, these are questions of a mostly tactical nature. The strategy of joint actions is defined in the questions of Egypt, Syria and oil. Each of them is significant not only for the Middle East, but for the rest of the world as well.

American-Saudi disagreements with regard to Egypt came to the surface last year, and the reason for them, according to the official American explanation, was Obama's non-acceptance of the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi in a military coup. Like most American explanations, this one has little in common with reality. It is well known that on the day of the coup both Morsi and the Egyptian military spent several hours in telephone negotiations with Riyadh and Washington (the same thing happened, incidentally, in Qatar during the dynastic reshuffle), only after which did the military began to take key objects in Cairo, Port Said and Alexandria under its control. Yes, one of the first to congratulate new acting president of Egypt Adli Mansur was King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia. However, the U.S., although it sent no congratulations, also reported a day later that it was prepared to give the new Egyptian leadership «all possible support».

Differences between Washington and Riyadh on the Egyptian question arose from the scale of the repressions which the Egyptian military leaders, who had undergone training in U.S. academies, rained down on the Muslim Brotherhood. Washington was counting on the participation of the Brotherhood in a coalition government and using the organization's capabilities in its other geopolitical configurations, for example, in Turkey or Syria. But Cairo and Riyadh did not plan on leaving such loopholes for their political opponents, preferring to «pull the weed out roots and all», including the recent death sentences pronounced against over five hundred Brotherhood members.

During Obama's recent visit, the «misunderstandings» on Egypt were resolved. Riyadh promised that the repressions would be scaled down and that the further development of Egypt would follow the path of «building democratic institutions and reforming the economy in accordance with market demands», for which the Saudis, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait have already allocated over 15 billion dollars in aid and loans, and they recently signed an agreement with the Egyptian military leadership on 40 billion dollars for a long-term housing construction program.

The topic of Syria dominated the negotiations between Obama and Abdullah, as here the greatest number of disagreements had accumulated with regard to how to overthrow al-Asad. However, it seems that the main disagreements have now been resolved.

For the most part, the Saudis only wanted one thing from the U.S. with regard to Syria: approval for supplying the rebels with heavy weaponry, including anti-tank systems and MANPADs. Riyadh believes that expanding the list of deliverables will create the main condition for victory over al-Asad. Indeed, changing the balance of power in favor of the rebels will make it possible to solve the two main problems at once. First, military successes achieved by the «secular opposition» with a new level of armament will seriously weaken the position of the radical Islamists, with whom the «secular» rebels are now fighting just as zealously as with the government troops. Second, those same military successes will enable the rebels to finally establish themselves in one of the regions bordering on Turkey and create a support base for the «new democratic government of Syria» there. This «government», naturally, will be recognized by many countries, and it will be able to obtain any kind of armaments on a legal basis, as it were. But the main thing is that it will be able to just as «legally» create a «no-fly zone» over the territory it controls before an attack on Damascus by the coalition of rebels and «foreign volunteers».

Official sources report that during the negotiations with King Abdullah, President Obama only rejected the idea of direct U.S. military strikes against Syria. Obama considered everything else, including the delivery of MANPADs to the rebels, to be possible. White House representatives do not speak plainly about this; they begin to prevaricate, but the question can essentially be considered resolved. After the negotiations, it is clear that this summer Riyadh and Washington, in partnership with other «friends of Syria», will once again try to use weapons to «close the issue» of al-Asad and of the Syrian Arab Republic in its current form...

As a result of Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia there is news for Russia as well. The time when Washington and Riyadh agreed, albeit grudgingly, to Russia's participation in the Middle Eastern process, with Moscow having the indefinite status of «cosponsor of peaceful regulation», has ended, and it ended after the Crimean referendum and the reunification of Crimea and Russia. All regional-level issues discussed in the Royal Garden in Riyadh were discussed as if Russia was no longer a factor in the region, and Moscow was a hindrance which must be removed from the region once and for all. As for the question of Saudi participation in the fight to lower prices on energy resources and the Gulf monarchies substituting their oil and gas for the volume Russia now provides to other strategic partners of the U.S., it was decided to consider that separately. Essentially, the Saudis have given their consent on this. The question will be worked out on the level of informal expert groups, which will be the ones who propose a plan for this fight to lower prices. Russia has approximately a year to develop and implement

countermeasures in the field of energy strategy. Later, when the informal agreements are formalized in plans and protocols, Russia could end up in a defensive position, which is clearly worse...