

Towards the Invasion of Syria by the “State Sponsors of Terrorism”? Saudi Arabia Contemplates Armed Intervention...

By [Stefan Marinov](#)

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As is known, on February 20, 2016 the United Nations Security Council did not accept the Russian proposal for a resolution on the need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria.

Against it voted six of its fifteen members, including three (out of five) having veto power: these are the United States, Britain, France, Ukraine, New Zealand and Spain. That is, it turns out that these six countries openly oppose the protection of the territorial integrity of another country which, like themselves, is a full member of the UN.

The situation is paradoxical, since such a position is in obvious contradiction with the very Constitution of the World Organization, i.e. the UN Charter.

The vote in the Security Council could only be interpreted as openly encouraging aggression against Syria, related to the desire of a number of regional and global players for the dismemberment of this country within the launched by the US project to reformat the entire Greater Middle East. Firstly, it comes to Turkey because it is precisely Ankara which is trying to gradually “absorb” some sections of northern Syria, formally under the pretext to create there the so-called “Security zone” and in practice to realize the neo-Ottoman ambitions of the ruling tandem Erdogan-Davutoglu.

Besides Turkey, however, in the dismemberment of Syria is highly interested also Saudi Arabia, which announced on February 13th that its warplanes are sent to Turkey ostensibly to help it in the fight against the Islamic State. Moreover, the Foreign Minister of the Kingdom Adel bin Ahmed al-Dzhubeyr and the adviser to the Defense Minister Prince Salman, Brigadier General Ahmed al-Assir did not exclude the participation of Saudi special forces in a joint ground operation with the Turkish army on the territory of Syria (setting as a precondition its approval by the US).

In fact, the truth is that at the moment Riyadh is in even more severe situation than Ankara. The ruling there dynasty is facing very many problems – from low oil prices that ravaged the Treasury of the Kingdom (the budget deficit in 2015 reached almost 100 billion dollars) to the ongoing civil war in Yemen in which Saudis are up to their necks and which also devours huge resources and involves a large part of the army of the country.

However, the plans of the Saudi authorities for armed intervention in Syria remain relevant, support for the armed Syrian opposition does not weaken, not to mention that on February

19th, the Foreign Minister al-Dzhubeyr said that they must be equipped with means of anti-aircraft defense to be able to successfully oppose air forces of the regime in Damascus and the Russian aviation supporting it. Calls for the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad do not stop either – if not by negotiations then by force (despite the adopted by Saudi Arabia commitments to support the negotiation process on the basis of the Geneva communiqué of June 2012 and the Vienna Declaration of the International Support Group on Syria of November 2015).

If Turkey, in the face of the tandem Erdogan-Davutoglu does not hide its dreams of a new Ottoman Empire, the Saudis would like to create something like “legitimate Sunni caliphate” (the so called “Sunnistan”) rather than the odious and apparently unacceptable for everybody Islamic State. According to many experts, precisely for this purpose at the end of 2015 was created the so called Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, formally including 34 Muslim countries. Saudi strategists plan this acceptable to the international community “caliphate” to include Syria, or at least its “Sunni” part, i.e. the eastern part of the country, where is also located the current “capital” of the Islamic State Raqqa that Saudis plan to seize using the special forces. It is clear that, given the explicit unacceptance of the regime in Damascus by Saudi Arabia, the possible control over the Islamists capital will hardly suggest its subsequent rendition to Assad. Not surprisingly, both in Damascus and Tehran, this plan was flatly rejected stating that if Saudi special forces enter Syrian territory they will leave it in coffins.

After refusing to approve the Russian draft resolution on Syria on February 20th it is clear that all these irrational plans of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which cannot be realized without a major war in the region, are in practice approved by Washington, London and Paris which probably rely on that the ambitious leaders in Ankara and Riyadh, carried away by their illusory plans to create in the region their own mini-empires, will collide frontally with the Russians in Syria and thus will allow all these forces to destroy each other, which in turn would solve geopolitical problems of the West for decades.

What are the real possibilities before the Saudis

In his speech to the European Parliament on February 16th (during his visit to Belgium) Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif warned Saudi Arabia not to send ground forces into Syria, as this would violate international law. Most analysts rated the warning as a veiled threat against Riyadh. In this connection interesting is the question is full participation of the Saudi army in such a military operation at all possible. As is known, until 2015, it was involved in only one major armed conflict – operation Desert Storm, carried out in 1990-1991 by the US-led coalition against Iraq. But although Saudi Prince Khaled bin Bandar was formally among the commanders of the half a million army of the coalition, the whole operation was led solely by US General Norman Schwarzkopf. As for Prince Bandar, he became best known with the giant deals for supply of US arms to Saudi Arabia, as some data show that only his own commissions amounted 4 bln. dollars, forcing the then Saudi King Fahd to fire the Prince from the post of Minister of Defense and order an investigation against him.

The second major international operation of the Saudi army was invading Yemen, launched in March 2015. As a result thereof, only direct victims among civilians in the country reached 2,500, and the economy and infrastructure of this poorest Arab country were completely destroyed. As for the military successes of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, experts

appreciate them as more than modest. The last of them was seizing the southern capital of the country Aden in July 2015. The Saudis failed to put under their control even the regional center Ta'izz, although the local population is hostile to the rebels houthi supported by Iran.

If the Saudis knew better the history they would probably remember the failures that endure in this part of the world the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, the Turks - in the seventeenth and nineteenth century, the British and Egyptian army - in the twentieth century, would unlikely so frivolously get involved in Yemen's civil war. At the background of its protraction and furiousness, possible attempt of Riyadh to engage in military operations on land in Syria seems doomed to failure.

But the way, the lack of combat experience and military strategy is not the only problem of the Saudis. A major war requires a lot of money, but because of the decline in oil prices the Kingdom is experiencing very serious financial problems. After the start of the so-called. "Arab Spring" in 2011, the then King Abdullah announced the launch of grandiose social programs totaling 72 bln. dollars. These included the creation of a state pension system, construction of a large number of affordable housing, creation of 90,000 new jobs (mainly in the state apparatus and power structures) and development of the most backward regions. The main objective was to ensure the loyalty of the masses to the regime, given the realistic threat of a large-scale anti-government protests.

About the extent to which the Saudi economy depends on oil speaks the fact that the budget of the Kingdom for 2016 is planned with whole 60 billion dollar deficit. Besides the social programs, this also calls into questions the help of Saudi satellites in the Arab world, allowing Riyadh to buy allies in the geopolitical struggle with Tehran. According to unofficial data, the aid amounts to 30 bln. dollars annually. It includes favorable loans to the military regime in Egypt, loans to Pakistan, subsidies paid to the monarchs of Bahrain and Jordan (allowing them to preserve their fragile power) and the bribery of tribal leaders in Yemen. Apart from this amount stands the help for the Islamists in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, the Kingdom can rely on its stabilization fund of 652 billion dollars, but at the current spending rates it will be emptied within the next 8-10 years. And then?

Realizing that he could not rely on its own forces in December 2015 Riyadh announced the creation of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, including 34 countries. But although formally announced as "anti-terrorist", this rather formal coalition is not directed against Al Qaeda or Islamic State, but against the main geopolitical adversary of Saudis - Iran. But even within its framework Riyadh has problems with its most battle worthy partners. Thus, very early in the Yemeni campaign, Pakistan and Egypt refused to participate. The first has to deal with too many internal problems, including its extremely troubled Northwestern province. Besides Islamabad does not want to spoil its relations with neighboring Iran. Egypt on the other hand is engaged in the fight against terrorists on the Sinai Peninsula and in the attempts to incorporate the floundering in chaos Libya in its sphere of influence. As for the Kings of Jordan and Morocco, who are formally willing to accept the proposals of Riyadh and rely on Saudi financial aid, they did not rush to send their militaries as cannon fodder in Syria. Thus, Riyadh is left with only such exotic allies as Sudan, Somalia and the Comoros, but they practically have no real military potential.

Therefore, statements about possible involvement of Saudi Arabia in the ground operation in Syria are assessed by many as a bluff. Indeed, Riyadh succeeded in gaining dominant influence over the Syrian armed opposition. The Kingdom has allies in almost all groups of

opponents of the regime: from the relatively moderate Syrian Revolutionary Front to Al-Nusra Front (although the latter was officially announced by Riyadh terrorist organization and the subjects of the Kingdom are not allowed to fight on its side, without Saudi help its fighters would not have been able to seize the strategic Syrian town of Idlib in May 2015). Meanwhile, recent successes of the Syrian army have seriously shaken the opponents of Assad. They surrender their positions one after the other and can no longer dream of the conquest of new territories, but only of the retention of the current ones. Moreover, military defeats limit the opposition's chances for success in the negotiations. Against this background, their Saudi patrons are left with nothing else but to threaten with direct military intervention. Time, however, will tell whether this tactic will be successful.

Riyadh as a factor for destabilization of the Middle East

The undertaken by Riyadh steps in foreign policy in the recent weeks, confirm the quoted by the British "Guardian" conclusions contained in a report by German intelligence (BND) from the end of 2015 (1), which emphasize the growing role of Saudi Arabia for the destabilization of the Middle East. Analysts of BND connect this to the renunciation of the cautious diplomacy of the former King Abdullah and the orientation to "impulsive policy of intervention" lead by the son of the current King and Defense Minister of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman, by deepening the confrontation with Iran, continuation of the war against the houthi in Yemen and support for the jihadists in Syria in their fight against the Assad regime.

The declared by Riyadh intention to send his ground forces into Syria within the international coalition against IS, led by the US, which is supported by Turkey and the UAE, not only illustrates the adventurous mind of the Saudi leaders, but also their endeavors by all means to engage Western countries in the realization of their regional ambitions.

Thus Riyadh is doing everything in its power to fail the started in Geneva consecutive round of negotiations to solve the Syrian problem (finished with the Decision for cease fire of February 27th) using the formed under its control Islamist opposition delegation (the so called High Negotiations Committee, including militants from Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh-al-Islam), which insists that Syrian army ceased their advance as a precondition for further talks. Obviously, after not seeing any material chances for success either on the battlefield or in the negotiations, the patronized by Riyadh "implacable opposition" (as opposed to the Syrian opposition group Moscow-Cairo, representing the secular democratic opposition in the country), sees the only way out in shifting the blame for the failure of the peace process on Damascus and provoking military intervention of Western countries, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies in Syria.

Declarations of Riyadh and Ankara's readiness to start ground operation became more frequent amid successes of government forces and Kurds, and the emerging possibility of failure of the plans of the Sunni groups to seize Syria, and transform it into an Islamic state. Obviously, the purpose of such an intervention is not to combat ID, but rather saving the patronized by Turkey and Saudi Arabia jihadists. That is, counting on the possibility that under the guise of the US-dominated international coalition, Turkish and Saudi forces would participate jointly with insurgents in a battle against the Syrian army and the Kurds, which will undoubtedly escalate hostilities.

Such attempt to provoke local conflict, however, may have unpredictable consequences. Given the lack of relevant UN sanctions, the emergence of Turkish and Saudi troops in Syria

will be reasonably interpreted by opponents as blatant aggression and Assad will be able to rely on additional support, including on the part of the current opposition. With this transformation of the Syrian conflict into a regional and the growing danger of an outbreak of a global conflict (in view of the Turkish membership in NATO) they stand the risk to make the EU a hostage to the adventurous policy of the tandem Erdogan-Davutoglu and their Saudi allies, in the face of King Salman (for whom the British magazine "The Economist" says that he suffers from senile dementia and Alzheimer's disease (2)) and his son - Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman (qualified by "The Independent" as naive and arrogant, and by other analysts as "mentally unbalanced" (3))

Thus, while Turkey concentrates along its border with Syria and Iraq a 150-thousand (with the rear units) expeditionary force, Saudi Arabia (according to BBC) probed the possibility to dislocate on Syrian territory as many troops of Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (4) where, according to "The Guardian" Riyadh itself is preparing to send there only a few thousand of its special forces and relies the main burden of fighting the forces of the regime and its allies to be taken by Turkey, Egypt Jordan and UAE. In Cairo and Amman are however convinced that overthrowing Assad by force will only further destabilize the region.

Against this background, now it became clear why in December 2015 Riyadh announced the creation of the aforementioned Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, and then jointly with Ankara formed the High Saudi-Turkish Strategic Council. The Saudi initiative for unification within the coalition of 34 mainly Sunni countries (luring them mostly with promises of generous financial aid) actually aims to make the Kingdom's neighbors do the dirty work in its own battle against the Iranian influence in the region.

According to most analysts, the fact that a country participating in the US-led international coalition to combat Islamic State forms its own coalition, which supposedly will pursue the same objectives as Washington, can only mean that Saudi Arabia actually places other than the US tasks in the fight against the Islamic State. Proof of this are the words of Prince Mohammed bin Salman himself that Islamic Coalition will not be limited to this fight only. In other words, the battle against terrorism is used by Saudi Arabia to get the approval of the international community to intervene in neighboring countries, especially in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. The true objectives of Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism "raise questions even among the leading countries in it. Egyptian leadership for example believes that instead of Turkey being admitted in the coalition, it should be declared a state-sponsor of terrorism, as well by the way as Qatar, which "is also directly responsible for the spread of terrorism in Syria and Iraq."

As is known, the establishment of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism was a personal initiative of Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is literally obsessed with the idea of forming an "Arab NATO". However, in Brussels suggest that the recent actions of the Saudi elite - from the creation of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism to the execution of 47 people accused of being terrorists (early January 2016) are connected, in addition to everything else, with the rivaling for power official crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and the son of the present King Mohammed bin Salman to prove themselves as decisive politicians who do not hesitate to take tough decisions to ensure the security of the country. Intensification of the struggle for power in Saudi Arabia and anti-Iraq hysteria in Riyadh show that Saudi Arabia itself has become a generator of crises (both internal and external) and will continue its policy of pumping tension in the region. In this way, however, the Saudis themselves are driving to rebellion repressed Shiite minority in the country.

It is obvious that neither the US, nor EU have an interest to succumb to the provocations of Riyadh and Ankara, as the objectives of the two countries differ from those of the West, including in the fight against terrorism. Instead, they should require Turkey and Saudi Arabia to strictly comply with resolution 2170 of the Security Council of the United Nations from 2014 requiring discontinuation of support for jihadists in Syria. Instead of closing their eyes, they should put straight on the table the issue of respecting human rights in the Kingdom, as well as of violations on the Saudi side of international humanitarian law in Yemen, where its aircrafts regularly bomb various civil projects, including hospitals of Doctors Without Borders. Given that Riyadh continues to practice mass executions, including beheading in style Islamic State, the question should be put forward of the possible exclusion of Saudi Arabia from the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Iran's reaction to the Saudi plans

As might be expected, the declaration of Riyadh from early February, that it may very soon launch a ground operation in Syria, provoked a sharp reaction of Tehran. So the Deputy Chief of the Iranian General Staff, Brigadier General Massoud Dzhazayeri officially declared that his country strongly opposes any Turkish-Saudi operation in Syria and threatened that if this happens, Iran will sharply increase the size and armament of its military housing in the country so that it "can defeat the aggressors." According Dzhazayeri: "we will not allow an even greater threat to security to occur in an already destroyed country. I am convinced that Saudi Arabia has already exhausted its military capabilities. Syria is not Yemen, and if they had the opportunity, Saudis long ago would have attacked the army of Assad". He also believes that without Riyadh, Ankara is unlikely to undertake a major operation in Syria. Classifying Turkey and Saudi Arabia as "rogue states" in the Middle East, General Dzhazayeri predicts that they will probably continue working to destroy Syria, but at the same time be aware that Iran and Russia are ready to immediately react and unload all their might upon them.

A little earlier, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Major General Mohammed Ali Jafari also expressed the view that "Saudi Arabia will not dare to send its army into Syria. It has no chance against the regular Iranian troops, which will be supported from the air by the Russian aviation". In this regard, he predicted that if they still dare to take ground operation in Syria, the Saudis will provoke a very difficult internal conflict that would prejudice the fate of the Kingdom.

In turn, during their meeting in Tehran with the Greek Prime Minister Tsipras, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamhani expressed the view that "the claims of Saudi Arabia and Turkey did not match their military potential" and warned Europe that he expects even more massive migrant crisis if Ankara and Riyadh still take ground operation in Syria.

However, it seems that all this is realized by the Saudi military too. In this aspect, the Arab site NTHNews.net has published a letter from a group of senior Saudi military to Crown Prince and Interior Minister, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, in which they oppose to sending ground troops into Syria, assessing such a decision as extremely dangerous (in the same letter, they determine the Saudi operation in Yemen as a "failure") (5).

According to that group of generals, virtually all opposition groups backed by Riyadh and Ankara are controlled by people who are citizens of Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which applies to many military commanders of the Islamic State, Al-Nusra Front and other extremist

organizations professing Wahhabism (i.e. the state religion of Saudi Kingdom). In addition, hundreds of Saudi clerics are also in the ranks of these terrorist organizations. Incidentally, Wahhabism is the only subject that is taught in schools in the “capital” of the Islamic State – the Syrian city of Rakka, besides, textbooks are the same as those in Saudi schools.

This means that on the one hand, troops of Riyadh (if still enter Syria) will find themselves in an extremely difficult situation, and the other – the political situation in Saudi Arabia itself will come out from under the control of the authorities. Saudi opposition-minded generals argue that the fragmentation of the military situation in Syria practically excludes warfare against only the army of Assad. In this regard, they point out that if the Saudi army decided to attack the troops of the Islamic State, it would be inadmissible support to Shiite militiamen and Iraqi army, and the army of Iran and the Russian aviation. On the other hand, if they decide to confine to only act against Assad, Riyadh risks becoming an official ally of the Islamic State. In a similar development, the US will be forced to raise their hands of the Saudis and let things be decided by Moscow and Tehran. That is, as stated in the commentary NTHNews.net, both internal and external political situation is not conducive to Riyadh.

On the other hand, as the Tehran-based international news channel Alalam News Network, stated: “Syria, Iran and Russia already headed firm warning to Riyadh, indicating that Saudi Arabia virtually intends to save the terrorists who recently suffered a series of heavy defeats, but they will not allow it”. (6)

Notes:

1. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudiArabia/12029546/Saudi-Arabia-destabilising-Arab-world-German-intelligence-warns.html>
2. <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21638134-generational-change-looms-ail-King>
3. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/Prince-mohammed-bin-salman-naive-arrogant-saudi-Prince-is-playing-with-fire-a6804481.html>
4. <https://gloria.tv/media/LiovfSVQzZE>
5. <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13941129000604>
6. <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1789285>

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