Two visits to Saudi Arabia have focused the attention of global media outlets on the Kingdom, clearly pinpointing the direction and outlook of its foreign policy.

To start with, the Saudi King hosted Israeli Rabbi David Rosen in his royal palace for the very first time in modern history on 24 February 2020. The meeting took place during a reception organized by the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID). Incidentally, David Rosen is a KAICIID board member. Citing the Rabbi, newspaper The Times of Israel reported that the meeting “was in fact the first-ever interfaith group hosted by King” Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. In addition, David Rosen, who is the Director of the American Jewish Committee’s (AJC) Department of Interreligious Affairs, was “one of nine KAICIID board members who attended the meeting with King Salman, and the only one representing Judaism”.

“In first, Saudi king hosts Israeli rabbi at royal palace,” reported Israeli media with great relish. The author of the article also believes that Saudi Arabia will establish “increasingly open relations with Israel” after such a gesture. Curiously, although the official Saudi Press Agency covered the event, names of meeting participants were not mentioned and only photographs of the reception were published. “Israel in Arabic” account on Twitter of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed this move by saying it had been taken in view of positive efforts that were being made to build bridges of tolerance between various religions. It has been reported that Israel’s Minister of the Interior Aryeh Deri issued a statement last month saying Israelis would be allowed to travel to Saudi Arabia for business and religious reasons. This essentially gave the green light to Israelis, first and foremost employees of Mossad and other intelligence agencies, to travel to Saudi Arabia openly for the first time since the establishment of the State of Israel.

Hence, there is now confirmation to the rumors, which were circulating earlier, that Riyadh, a long-standing leader of the Arab world, was going to do away with its tough policies towards Israel. So all of these secret meetings between various representatives of both nations over several years (which also took place in the Sultanate of Oman) have not been in vain after all. Even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was brave enough to visit Oman, meet with its former Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said and conduct successful negotiations with him. Arabic media outlets agree on the fact that the aforementioned visit, meeting and talks played a fairly important role in bringing Saudi Arabia and Israel closer together. And Riyadh, which was viewed as the leader of the Arab world owing in large part to its support of Palestine and opposition to Israeli policies, has now completely altered its foreign policy course and chose Iran as its key foe.

The second event was the visit by Donald Trump’s loyal hawk, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, to Saudi Arabia and his negotiations with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and the Kingdom’s Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud on a number of important issues of interest to both countries. The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to ensure friendly relations between the two nations and expressed their willingness to continue their cooperation in battling global terrorism, extremism and instability in the Middle East. Afterwards, the U.S. Department of State issued a statement noting “the strong and enduring 75-year partnership between Saudi Arabia and the United States”.

Although there was no mention of Iran in any official reports about the visit, according to leaks from the royal palace, both sides spent a considerable amount of time on agreeing a common confrontational stance towards the Iranian regime. On one side, Donald Trump, having withdrawn from the so-called nuclear deal, is personally trying to
strangle Iranian people with his inhumane sanctions, which were imposed against not only Iran but also any countries and companies that continued to conduct business with Tehran. On the other side, there is Riyadh that now views Iran as its key foe because it is challenging Saudi dominance in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and the Persian Gulf region.

It is also worth noting that there seems to have been a rift between King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud as of recent. And the former, despite his age and illnesses, has become increasingly involved in state affairs again and has chosen to make difficult decisions himself. And this time around, it was the King who conducted key negotiations with Mike Pompeo, which confirmed the main direction of Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy. Still, only photographs of U.S. Secretary of State and the Crown Prince appeared in Saudi newspapers and there was no mention of any negotiations.

There is nothing inexplicable or incomprehensible about the apparent temporary rift between Mohammad bin Salman and his father. The Crown Prince has not had many successes but has failed quite a lot. By continuing to pursue the Saudi policy to try and remove Syria’s legitimately elected President, Bashar al-Assad, from power, Mohammad bin Salman has spent $3-5 billion to support bandits and terrorists, who are currently centered in around Idlib, but with little success. The Crown Prince personally initiated a senseless war against neighboring Yemen, thus only bringing grief and destruction to his Muslim brothers there. Even the United Arab Emirates have withdrawn their troops from Yemen’s territories. And, nowadays, Yemenis are enjoying some military success by conducting increasingly destructive missile strikes against the Saudis. And if poorly armed Houthi rebels are capable of causing substantial damage to Aramco’s oil processing facilities, what is stopping them from carrying out a missile strike against the royal palace? At the Crown Prince’s behest, his Arab friends severed diplomatic ties with the small State of Qatar and imposed sanctions against it. However, these actions did not bring him any kudos either. At present, Doha is pursuing an independent domestic and foreign policy course in the interests of Qatari people, having established good relations with Turkey and Iran.

Mohammad bin Salman’s economic policies have also not been successful. A portion of Aramco’s shares has been sold but not in the manner the Crown Prince expected. In addition, low oil prices, at present, are having a negative effect on Saudi Arabia’s state budget, and are forcing the nation to spend its reserves too quickly. The Saudi population continues to enjoy a lifestyle as if the crude oil price per barrel was still $90. The decision to sell a share of Saudi Aramco in an international initial public offering (IPO) stemmed from the financial difficulties facing the Kingdom. In the end, King Salman was forced to issue an order for Saudi Arabia to further decrease its oil output by 167,000 barrels (in addition to cuts agreed with OPEC+) to 10.144 million barrels a day. Such decrees, however, have very little effect on actual oil production levels in the country because Saudis often exceed their planned daily output. From the perspective of many OPEC members, this was a rational decision, after all, many of these countries’ state budgets strongly depend on proceeds from selling crude oil. For instance, to balance its budget, Saudi Arabia needs the cost of Brent crude oil to remain at $90 a barrel, and any reduction in this price causes a lot more damage to their economy than a comparatively small decrease in its exports does. In response to all of these developments, Cairo-based newspaper Al-Ahram wrote that it would be in the interests of all Saudis not to let the unlucky Crown Prince to return to power.

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