Saudi Arabia Stands at the Threshold of New Difficulties and Troubles

A senior Israeli official told the London-based Arab news agency Elaph that the Saudis have stopped all behind-thescenes negotiations with Israel. He claims that Saudi Arabia will not sign any peace agreement with Israel unless there is progress on the Palestinian issue.

This and other reports in the world media came about two months after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held a secret meeting in Riyadh. These reports say that attempts to portray Israel-Saudi normalization as close to completion were likely motivated by personal or political considerations. According to reports in several US newspapers, even indirect communication indirectly mediated by the Americans has ceased due to leaked information about the secret meeting between Benjamin Netanyahu and Mohammed bin Salman. As a matter of fact, the Saudi Foreign Ministry and Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, denied that the meeting had taken place. Elaph notes that active US efforts by outgoing Trump to pressure Riyadh to sign an agreement to normalize relations with Tel Aviv have been unsuccessful, and the future of relations between the two countries is now covered by “Middle East gloom”.

But this diplomatic setback was not the last in the foreign policy course that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is
now trying to pursue, taking advantage of his father’s advanced age and illness. It’s unclear whether it’s about relations with Syria, Qatar, Yemen, Iran, or about the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the associated clamor to put the Saudi on trial in the United States because he was already an American journalist. There are also occasional attempts to hold the kingdom responsible for the events of 9/11/2001, since most of the terrorists were Saudi nationals. Although these events took place 20 years ago, the crown prince and the future king will have to be responsible for them. Together with falling oil prices, the kingdom’s difficult economic situation and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is rather hard to envy the future Saudi king. As the saying goes, “One is too few, three is too many”

After several years of pressure and sanctions, relations with Qatar seemed to be getting better. Joe Biden’s victory in November spurred mediation efforts, and Kuwait was able to plan a reconciliation agreement for the 41st Gulf Summit (the Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Sabah Summit, as it was named for the recently deceased monarchs of Oman and Kuwait), which was held in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, on January 5. The Al-Ula Declaration of January 5 expresses the hope that the reconciliation agreement will restore unity among the signatories and reinforce their commitment to the “great goals” of the Gulf Cooperation Council. But there is already a very urgent question: will reconciliation be sustainable? Many observers believe that only Doha has benefited from the reconciliation, because the embargo has been lifted and life there is gradually returning to normal, although it is unclear what the Emir of Qatar has offered in return.

Some experts in the Saudi media have noted that Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with the mediation of Kuwait, have set a time frame for a gradual, cautious break in ties between Qatar, on the one hand, and Iran and Turkey, on the other. The results of that remain to be seen. However, others believe that there is unlikely to be a profound or particular change in Qatar’s policy toward the two regional powers. And while the Saudi-Qatari reconciliation is real and sustainable, it leaves Qatar’s differences with Egypt and the UAE unresolved, which cools the situation in the entire Persian Gulf.

But, of course, the most important thing for the crown prince is building relations with the new administration of Joe Biden, who has his own plans for Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the entire situation in the Persian Gulf region. Apparently, in the near future, Washington will give priority to relations with Iran. In an interview with the New York Times, the US president reiterated his intention to return to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the new administration will carefully consider a new deal with Iran: “This will be a more lasting and robust agreement. If Iran comes back into compliance, we would too.” He added that Iran’s ballistic missile program would also be addressed, but at the moment “we’re a long way from that.”

Of course, Riyadh sharply opposes this plan because the 2015 deal, according to the Saudis, guarantees that Iran will become a nuclear state. In that case, the Saudis would also have to consider the issue of nuclear weapons, and a kind of nuclear race would begin, in which Riyadh is unlikely to be the winner. Media reports over the past few weeks have detailed some plans by Saudi Arabia and Israel to persuade the new administration to reconsider its position. Among other things, the Israeli government, with the help of the Saudis, intends to use documents from the Iranian nuclear archive that Mossad agents smuggled out of Tehran in 2018 to show Joe Biden and his advisers that the 2015 deal was based on the incorrect assumption that Iran’s nuclear program was supposedly defensive and civilian. The archive, in their view, irrefutably proves that Iran’s nuclear program was and always has been designed to produce nuclear weapons, not medical isotopes, and that the purpose of this nuclear arsenal is not to defend against its enemies, but to destroy them, primarily Saudi Arabia and Israel.

In a curtsey toward the newly elected US president, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan expressed optimism that relations between Riyadh and Washington will be “excellent” under US President Joe Biden, Al-Arabiya TV channel quoted the Saudis. Although Joe Biden promised during his campaign to review relations with Saudi Arabia, calling for an end to US support for the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen.

It should be noted that Saudi Arabia and the other Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf have long been allies of the United States. But now is a very important moment for Riyadh, when it is necessary to build a new relationship with Washington and prove that Saudi Arabia is a key ally of the Americans not only in the Persian Gulf region, but also in the entire Middle East.

Viktor Mikhin, corresponding member of RANS, exclusively for the online magazine "New Eastern Outlook".