What Will Biden’s Attempts to Tame Riyadh Lead to?

Against the backdrop of the attempts to publicly humiliate Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman undertaken by the Biden administration, Washington in recent weeks has actively sought to use Riyadh in a game against Iran to its own advantage. To ease its sanctions and develop contacts with Tehran, the White House gave appropriate instructions to its strategic partner Saudi Arabia to soften Riyadh’s approach toward building new relations with Iran.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are two powerful neighbors committed to two different Islamic movements (Iran is predominantly Shiite, and Saudi Arabia is considered to be the leader of Sunni Islam). For decades, they have been vying for supremacy in a region where the majority of the Sunni or Shiite population consider either Riyadh or Tehran as their spiritual landmark.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have become particularly exacerbated over the past 15 years. To a certain extent, this happened after 2003, when a coalition led by the United States overthrew Iraqi Sunni leader Saddam Hussein, and afterwards opposition to Iranian influence was dealt a blow in this important country in the region, so that has been steadily growing there ever since. The Arab Spring protests that swept across the region in 2011 were used by Iran and Saudi Arabia to advance their own influence, particularly in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, further fueling mutual animosity.
In 2016, in the wake of the execution in Saudi Arabia of the famous Shiite cleric Ayatollah Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr and forty-six members of its Shiite minority that were accused of involvement in terrorism, the subsequent anti-Saudi statements made by Tehran, and an attack on the Saudi embassy in Iran, Saudi Arabia broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. Bahrain, Sudan, and Djibouti also suspended their diplomatic relations with Iran out of solidarity.

In recent years, the confrontation has become especially aggravated due to the events in Yemen, Syria, as well as mutual accusations of terrorism.

As a result, nowadays among the regional allies that Saudi Arabia has are the Sunni countries: the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan.

Iran's ally is the government of Syria. In armed confrontations, Iranian-backed Shiite groups, including Hezbollah, also played a significant role in the fight against Israel and the forces that oppose Iran, mainly the Sunni opposition in certain countries. The predominantly Shiite Iraqi government is also Iran’s close ally, although paradoxically it maintains close ties with Washington.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in an effort to start a new game in the Middle East with the participation of Saudi Arabia and Iran, Iraq was the one specifically chosen by the White House.

On April 9, it was in Baghdad that direct negotiations took place between delegations from Saudi Arabia and Iran took place, which resulted from the mediating mission by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazimi. Naturally, the main issue under discussion was the conflict in Yemen, which has turned into the largest humanitarian catastrophe of the 21st century - one in which Riyadh and Tehran support opposing sides. Saudi Arabia is looking for ways to end the war, which poses a threat to the security of the kingdom, and is striving to stop the advance of Shiite militants in the province of Marib, reopen the port of Hodeidah - through which a significant part of humanitarian aid arrives in Yemen - and put an end to the attacks using missiles and UAVs made by Houthis on the kingdom’s territory. Although the parties acknowledged that the very fact the meeting took place was a significant, positive shift in bilateral relations, according to Iranian media the delegation of the Islamic Republic still took a tough stance, suggesting that Saudi Arabia should negotiate not with Iran, but with the Houthi movement’s leadership.

Back in July 2019, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announced his readiness to hold a dialogue with Saudi Arabia, given reciprocal signals in response from Riyadh. However, since that time relations between the two geopolitical adversaries have only worsened, especially after a series of incidents involving tankers in the Persian Gulf. The culmination of bilateral tensions was the September 14, 2019 air attack against oil facilities on Saudi territory, for which Riyadh and Washington blamed Tehran.

Speaking about the latest contacts in Iraq, which was first reported by the British Financial Times, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh reiterated on April 19 that Tehran has always welcomed dialogue with Saudi Arabia, but still did not confirm or refute media reports about the start of direct talks this month between these traditional Middle Eastern geopolitical rivals. At the same time, a senior Iranian official and two other diplomatic sources told Reuters that Saudi and Iranian officials held talks in Iraq to ease tensions as Washington works to revive the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran, and to end the war in Yemen.

However, the plan developed by Washington for the "to reconcile Saudi Arabia and Iran" has already begun to fail. The reason for this was that the US Congress House of Representatives approved a bill that would limit the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. This legislative initiative was a response to the 2018 assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and will remain in effect until the US president can confirm that the kingdom is not engaged in repressing and torturing dissidents, as well as arbitrarily detaining its citizens.

Owing to this, Saudi Arabia has already begun to withdraw from peacekeeping actions taken in respect to Iran, and has called upon the international community to bolster the measures to control the situation and prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. However, the negotiation process between the United States and Iran is progressing rather slowly so far. The sanctions against Iran turned out to be a stumbling block: Tehran is demanding the complete lifting of all restrictive measures imposed by Washington, while the United States says it is not ready to view restrictions as a negotiating tool. For its part, Riyadh also supports resuming work on the "nuclear deal", but on condition that deal spells out the issues that govern Iran's missile program. In addition, the Saudi authorities are calling upon other Gulf states to join the negotiation process.

Vladimir Platov, expert on the Middle East, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.