Saudi Arabia and Iran Prepare for a Breakthrough in their Relations.

Information of secret negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Baghdad has already appeared in the media. This situation was clarified after a sensational statement announced by the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman who recently said, “Saudi Arabia wants Iran to prosper and is ready to cooperate based on mutual benefit.”

Iran-Saudi relations became very difficult, especially after Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979. The essence of interstate and religious differences is clear if you look at the Middle East map. Most of the population in a particular country is Sunni or Shiite. In this regard, there is a noticeable polarization of countries, many of which consider Saudi Arabia or Iran as their spiritual and political reference point.

Relations between Riyadh and Tehran have been particularly strained in the past two decades. Especially, after the US-led coalition overthrowing of Saddam Hussein in 2003, president of Iraq, a Sunni Arab and one of Iran's main enemies, there was no counterweight to Iran's influence in Iraq, which has been steadily growing since then. During the wave of Arab Spring protests that swept through the region in 2011, Iran and Saudi Arabia tried to use it to promote their influence, particularly in Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, which further increased mutual distrust.

In recent years, the strategic confrontation has become markedly intense because Iran has become the winner in the regional struggle by many indicators. For example, in Syria, thanks to the support of Iran (and Russia), President Bashar al-Assad managed to suppress most of the opposition forces supported by Saudi Arabia. Regarding the confrontation in Iraq, the supporters of Tehran are also winning. The six-year war waged by Riyadh against rebels
from neighboring Yemen, partly driven by Saudi Arabia's desire to nullify Iran's supposed influence is also unsuccessful for the Saudi monarchy requiring too much money. The attempt to escalate the political confrontation in Lebanon in order to destabilize the country, in which the Iranian-backed Shiite group Hezbollah plays a leading role in politics and controls the Armed Forces, has not yet brought Riyadh the expected success.

Although Iran and Saudi Arabia have not engaged in direct combat, their support is involved in armed conflicts in the region. Syria and Yemen are clear examples of this. And the missiles that the Houthis have repeatedly fired at Saudi Arabia have intensified the war of words between the two countries.

The current situation has long forced Saudi Arabia to take steps that would defuse tensions in the region. Despite its economic power, from a military point of view, the country is fragile compared to Iran.

The White House made its recommendations regarding the future relations of Saudi Arabia with Iran back in 2016, responding to the initiatives of the Saudi leadership to break off diplomatic ties with Iran. Then The Atlantic published the Obama Doctrine, where the statements of the American President Obama were made public for the first time, which contained harsh criticism of Saudi Arabia and doubted the feasibility of further strategic partnership between the United States and the Saudis. In particular, President Obama noted that Saudi Arabia should learn to live in the region together with Iran and share spheres of influence with it. Riyadh was given to understand that Washington would not, as before, cover Saudi Arabia in the event of a conflict with Iran and would not take an openly pro-Saudi position. (Well, Riyadh should have expected this from the United States, having abandoned its allies on many occasions when their support became a burden to the White House!).

Given that the current administration at the White House essentially repeats the political line of President Obama's era, Washington's position on Tehran was voiced by President Joe Biden to Riyadh. This was the reason for the demonstration of signs of warming in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which drew the attention of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. In particular, Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman's statement that the kingdom seeks good relations with the "neighboring country," forgetting how three years ago he compared the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei to Hitler. According to the publication, the "conciliatory tone" of the crown prince is clearly explained by an attempt to adapt to the new US foreign policy line aimed at normalizing relations with Iran.

Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman spoke about the necessary adjustment of Saudi Arabia's policy towards Iran and other countries in the region under the influence of the foreign policy conditions that have changed in recent months in an extensive interview with Arab TV channels, emphasizing his 90% support for Biden's policy. In addition to a possible reconciliation with Iran, Muhammad bin Salman also indicated the kingdom's readiness to provide economic support to the Yemeni Houthis, but, of course, on certain terms.

Six years after the outbreak of war with Yemen, the kingdom began to search for a way out of the conflict. However, it is difficult for Riyadh to do this without assistance from Iran. At present, the Houthis are not taking any steps to resolve the conflict outside the battlefield. As the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif recently stated in an interview not intended for the public, causing widespread dissatisfaction in Iran, Saudi Arabia has rejected Iran's mediation offers in recent years. Nevertheless, the central topic of the Saudi-Iranian talks in Baghdad was Yemen. This conversation is now taking place in a "more constructive tone," the kingdom is gradually adapting its policy to the new realities. In particular, the adjustment of Saudi Arabia's policy announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman mainly includes the refusal of Riyadh from its intention to expel the Iranian-backed Yemeni Houthi rebels from Sanaa and other parts of Yemen by military means.

The fact that the United States, under President Joe Biden, is trying to achieve rapprochement in the nuclear dispute with Iran is another reality that Saudi Arabia's policy must adapt to.

Iran, for its part, is also interested in improving relations with Saudi Arabia for many reasons. First of all, it tries to counteract closer cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel, strengthening the anti-Iran bloc in the region. Israel's outspoken dissatisfaction with the rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran was demonstrated by Tel Aviv in early April to Saudi Arabia because the latter did not inform in advance about the nature of the ongoing negotiations in Baghdad. In addition, President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif hope that the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia will strengthen their positions in the internal struggle for power in Iran.

The current situation forces Riyadh to step towards rapprochement with Iran, which will help defuse tensions in the
region. After all, one of the main conditions that guarantee the success of the economic reforms conceived by the Saudi authorities is stability and peace in the area: not to spend enormous resources on defense, but to direct such resources to necessary projects that will significantly reduce the kingdom's dependence on oil revenues.

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