Saudi Arabia Restores Relations with Syria

Recently, there has been a clear trend among Middle Eastern countries to review the foreign policy directions that have been pursued in recent decades. The most striking example of this is the adjustment of Riyadh’s foreign policy vectors, especially with regard to countries with which Saudi Arabia has long been at enmity.

After preparing a diplomatic breakthrough with Tehran in April 2021, Riyadh initiated direct contacts with Damascus, preparing to reopen its diplomatic mission and establish relations with Bashar al-Assad.

The Saudi embassy in Damascus was closed in March 2012, a year after the start of the Arab Spring in Syria and the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Riyadh has openly supported terrorist and takfiri groups against the Syrian authorities and the Syrian people, who have tried in vain to overthrow President Assad. However, after the military successes of Damascus, achieved with the help of Russia, the Kingdom and other monarchies of the Persian Gulf revised their position towards trying to restore relations with the Syrian government. Now Riyadh wants to revive diplomatic relations in order to ease the tensions tearing the Middle East apart.

It should be noted that Abu Dhabi had previously wanted to get relations with Damascus back on track by reopening the UAE embassy in late December 2018. In April 2021, a humanitarian shipment of COVID-19 vaccine was brought to the SAR from the UAE.

These actions by the UAE and Saudi Arabia’s intentions to resume diplomatic relations show that there is a
possibility of achieving an actual "Arab breakthrough" with regard to Syria and ending the externally orchestrated boycott of the country. Riyadh and Damascus, through the resumption of bilateral relations, will be able to end the protracted armed conflict that has killed more than 2 million ordinary Syrians.

Explaining Riyadh's adjustment of policy toward Syria, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan refrained from using the term "Syrian regime" in an April 5 interview with CNN and instead already used the term "Bashar al-Assad government" to emphasize the need to find a compromise way to resolve disputes between the opposition and the government in Syria. He emphasized, "Saudi Arabia supports a political solution in Syria and hopes that Bashar al-Assad's government will take appropriate steps to find a political solution. Because it is considered the only way to make progress in Syria." He then went on to say that Riyadh supports the UN-sponsored program to bring the Syrian opposition into the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan of the KSA said at a press conference with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov on April 11 that Syria needs to return to its "Arab embrace" and achieve stability and security. The Saudis have recently begun to show that they agree in principle to facilitate the return of Syria to the League of Arab States at the next session of the LAS in Algeria. Earlier, Algeria, Iraq, the UAE and Egypt spoke positively about Syria's reconstruction in the LAS. Russia and Iran also support the process of Syria's return to the LAS, as this would finally record Assad's political victory and restore his international legitimacy. Just as the opening of an embassy in Damascus by Saudi Arabia would look like an obvious admission by the Saudis in the Middle East that Assad has won. Although the Saudis said back in 2018 that Assad remained in the lead in Syrian politics.

As for Riyadh's relationship with the Syrian opposition, in recent months it has demonstrated its willingness to discuss with Syria the formation of an acceptable legal opposition that Damascus would be willing to recognize and allow to engage politically. It was reported that Saudi Arabia terminated its official relations with the Syrian opposition and reportedly closed the headquarters of the Supreme Opposition Council in Riyadh, trying to show that the Kingdom has done away with its support for terrorists on the territory of Syria.

Against the background of Riyadh's demonstration of its intention to clearly and consistently implement the Syrian-Saudi "warming" project, Bashar Assad's regime responds quite adequately to the kingdom's good intentions, even demonstrating on the international scene a favorable attitude to the Saudis becoming guarantors of security in the MENA region, while maintaining Moscow's mediating role. In turn, Riyadh is also interested in using Moscow as an intermediary not only in negotiations with Damascus, but also in many other trouble spots in the Middle East. This was demonstrated, in particular, by the results of the visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Riyadh on April 11 and his talks there with his counterpart Faisal bin Farhan and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As well as almost regular phone conversations between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prince Mohammed bin Salman, which have already become a regular feature of Saudi initiatives on various regional issues and Saudi-Russian relations. Moreover, it cannot be ruled out that, given the strained relations between the new White House administration and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in recent months, the kingdom is trying to determine its future direction in the international arena and find a "fallback ally" in the person of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

As for steps to legitimize Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, Riyadh clearly wants to show its "good will" to Iran, with which Saudi Arabia is also seeking to restore good neighborly relations. In addition, the strengthening of Assad's position could be, according to the Saudis, a significant deterrent to Turkish expansion.

Undoubtedly, the U.S. and Israel will try to hinder the restoration of relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia, because this process destroys the U.S. policy of political and economic isolation of Syria and will strengthen Iran's position in the Arab country.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's steps toward Syria could certainly serve as an international guarantee that the region can soon return to peace and forget about the time of the protracted Arab Spring and mutual conflicts.

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