What Made Riyadh to Step Up its Military Cooperation with Moscow?

In 2020, Saudi Arabia ranked sixth worldwide in military spending, totaling $57.5 billion spent. Presently, the largest suppliers of weapons to the kingdom are NATO member states, and above all the United States. The US Congress has repeatedly called for an end to arms sales to Riyadh in the face of the ongoing war in Yemen, but so far these initiatives have failed to gain traction. Moreover, until recently, Washington tried to exert complete control over Riyadh’s military cooperation with other states, under threat of sanctions, forbidding it to buy foreign military equipment anywhere but from the US and its “trusted allies,” even if it would be far more effective than American equipment. This, in particular, was repeatedly written about by the well-known US military and analytical publication The National Interest.

For example, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has repeatedly considered the prospect of buying Russia’s S-400 Triumf missile defense system, already recognized worldwide as the most advanced and far superior to the current American models. Twice already, in 2009 and 2017, the KSA and Russia were close to reaching an agreement on the purchase of several divisions of S-400 by Riyadh, but, due to the pressure from Washington, the deal was never finalized. In particular, the administration of the previous US President, Donald Trump, desperately pressured Riyadh to, firstly, thwart this and other possible military deals with Moscow, and, secondly, to have the Saudis divert as much money as possible to the purchase of American weapons. The figures would reach as high as $400 billion.

Similar pressure was exerted by Washington in response to the Royal Saudi Arabian Air Force’s 2017 intention to
replace the aging American F-15 Eagles with 12-18 next-generation Russian Su-35 fighters. But once again, the previous administration of Washington made every effort to prevent any rapprochement between Russia and Saudi Arabia, be it in the arms trade or in any other area.

Nevertheless, as a result of measures taken by Russia, some projects for the licensed production of certain advanced Russian military equipment in Saudi Arabia have been implemented, despite the desperate efforts of the US to prevent this. One example is Riyadh’s 2019 deal with Russian defense giant Rostec for domestic production of one of the world’s most advanced Russian AK-103 rifles, a derivative of the AK-74M, for the 7.62×39mm cartridge.

In 2017, after the Russian military successfully employed a number of Russian military equipment in the Syrian conflict, Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) signed a major contract with Rosoboronexport, Russia’s main arms export agency, for domestic production of Russian TOS-1A Solntsepek heavy flamethrower systems. Saudi experts have praised this military equipment, designed not only to disable lightly armored vehicles, but also to destroy enemy troops, both in open terrain and in buildings and shelters.

As part of the same 2017 bilateral technology transfer agreement with Russia, under which the KSA adopted the TOS-1A Solntsepek, SAMI purchased an improved version of the Kornet-EM, one of Russia’s most popular export military equipment in the Middle East, a “fire-and-forget” kind of weapon. Moreover, the Kornet with its tactical and technical characteristics and combat performance is not any worse than the well-publicized American anti-tank system Javelin, but it is 10 times cheaper and four times as far reaching - up to 10 km instead of 2.5.

Reaffirming Riyadh’s continued interest in purchasing the S-400 Triumf missile defense system from Russia, the Saudi authorities have shown interest in the Russian Abakan air defense system, the world’s first specialized system for countering high-speed high-altitude targets with ballistic trajectories. To date, Russia and Saudi Arabia have already held consultations and negotiations on the possible purchase of Abakan, which could become an alternative to the American Patriot SAMs. This is primarily due to the fact that Riyadh is not very happy with the effectiveness of the Patriot against missiles and drones that are launched from the territory of Yemen.

Ahmad Al Ohali, head of Saudi Arabia’s General Authority for Military Industry (GAMI), reported in the agency’s semi-annual report that there has been a 41% increase in the number of licensed defense companies since the beginning of the year. As part of the national strategy for the military industry sector, Saudi Arabia identified 11 target areas as priorities, developed a research roadmap, adopted an acquisition strategy, and determined how to encourage the military industry to flourish in the kingdom. Saudi Arabia is investing billions of dollars in its own defense industry to reduce dependence on imports, as well as to create new jobs in an area that involves the production of high value-added goods.

In addition, despite the continuing warnings from Washington, Riyadh increasingly focused on developing military cooperation with other world powers, not following US demands, but in its own interests of enhancing the combat capabilities of the Saudi armed forces and the kingdom’s security. As the Saudis themselves admit, the ongoing US sanctions threats — one of them recently featured in an article in The New York Times — played an important role in adjusting this approach. In it, in particular, representatives of the FBI indicated their intention to soon publish previously classified data on the September 11, 2001 attacks, which could shed light on the alleged direct involvement of Saudi Arabia in the attacks, causing new problems in the Saudi-American relations.

In these circumstances, at the Army-2021 military-technical forum held in Kubinka near Moscow on August 23, the deputy defense ministers of Saudi Arabia and Russia (Prince Khaled bin Salman Al Saud and Alexander Fomin, respectively) signed an agreement on military-technical partnership between the two countries. At a meeting with a delegation from Saudi Arabia, Defense Minister of Russia, Army General Sergei Shoigu said that the Russian military department is set for the dynamic development of military-technical cooperation with the kingdom.

According to the Saudi prince, Russia has extensive experience in creating products to meet various challenges and contribute to security, and Saudi Arabia is ready to take into account the experience gained by the Russian Federation. Prince Khaled bin Salman Al Saud stressed that his country is prepared to establish cooperation with Russia, which “will contribute to a common response to all modern challenges, something we will do together.”

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