In recent years, Saudi Arabia and Iran have intensified bilateral talks to resolve existing differences to stabilize the regional situation. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the two country’s foreign ministries discuss some serious issues, not least of which is the situation in Yemen, where the countries support different sides in the conflict. Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian described positively the ongoing direct bilateral talks, noting that the countries are now “on the right track.”

As for the Saudi side’s assessment of the talks, the Kingdom stresses that contacts with Iran are now “experimental” for them - Riyadh is probing the ground and exploring opportunities to improve relations. However, since the American presence and influence in the Middle East is clearly diminishing, Riyadh clearly understands that the balance of power in the region has been shifting lately. Under these circumstances, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf cannot ignore the interests of a major power such as Iran. Riyadh and its neighbors in the Persian Gulf have realized that regional rivalry in the current circumstances hinders the development of the Middle Eastern states. At the same time, stable relations and business contacts, in turn, are a better alternative - they can become the guarantee of security and joint development. In this regard, the launched direct talks between the Iranians and the Saudis may positively stabilize the regional situation.

Against this background of Saudi Arabia’s active rapprochement with Iran, a publicly critical statement of the Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman on September 20 at the annual general conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna drew attention, as he condemned Iran’s desire to acquire a nuclear bomb. “The Kingdom insists on the importance of keeping the Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. On this basis, we
support international efforts aiming at preventing Iran from having nuclear weapons,” he added. However, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman also voiced calls to eliminate the Israeli nuclear threat and free the Middle East of nuclear weapons.

On October 12, Arab News reported that Saudi Arabia’s cabinet reiterated its call to rid the Middle East of nuclear weapons and reaffirmed its importance in implementing the chemical weapons ban convention. The statements were made by Acting Minister of Media Dr. Essam bin Saad bin Saeed after the weekly cabinet meeting chaired by King Salman of Saudi Arabia.

It is worth noting that just a couple of years ago, Riyadh gave reasonable grounds for the international public to have real concerns that Saudi Arabia itself might turn into a state that would build a nuclear bomb if it wanted to, against the opposition of the world community. And even the Israeli media suggested that the Trump Administration was making efforts to accelerate the transfer of critical nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia.

Recall that Saudi Arabia is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) but has made it clear publicly several times that it reserves the right to enrich uranium on its territory. Riyadh has also insisted on this right amid developments in Iran’s nuclear program, thus showing that Saudi Arabia is interested in building infrastructure to enrich uranium on its territory and will not settle for a peaceful nuclear reactor.

A definite indication of past US involvement was a congressional report released in February 2019. The document was based on testimony from several individuals who pointed to efforts by the Trump Administration to accelerate the transfer of critical nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia. According to the same evidence, officials in the administration approved the transfer of technology from American companies to Riyadh to build nuclear reactors in the country, ignoring the Atomic Energy Act of 1954. At the same time, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif sharply condemned the “hypocrisy” of the US over the planned sale of nuclear technology to the Saudi regime.

However, despite opposition in Congress from opponents of Washington’s continued close nuclear ties with Riyadh, in March 2019, former US Energy Secretary Rick Perry approved six secret approvals for US companies to provide nuclear energy technology and other assistance in this area to Saudi Arabia. Reuters learned about it after reading a copy of the document of the US Department of Energy. This same information was also confirmed in late March 2019 by the US publication The Daily Beast, which reported that the US Department of Energy had secretly permitted six US companies to enter into an initial deal with Saudi Arabia to build a nuclear reactor. But while the administration acknowledged this, it declined to disclose which companies were granted permission as part of the agreement.

Meanwhile, many US lawmakers remain concerned that sharing nuclear technology with Saudi Arabia could eventually lead to a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. These sentiments are reinforced by the fact that back in 2018, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman indicated in an interview with CBS America that the Kingdom would develop nuclear weapons if Iran did so.

As Israeli experts have stated in the media, Saudi Arabia, while remaining a conservative Arab country responsible for the spread of radical Islam, can use its reputation as the head of the anti-Iranian bloc to demand uranium enrichment on its territory in a dialogue with the US administration. Moreover, the American president may agree to it without congressional oversight and consultation with the appropriate experts.

In this regard, one senses that under the influence of the changing international conjuncture, and wishing to please the current US authorities, including in preventing further accusations of Washington’s transfer of nuclear technology to Riyadh, the Saudi authorities have adjusted their public statements regarding the nuclear program, calling for ridding the Middle East of nuclear weapons.

However, the sincerity of Riyadh’s statements and its rejection of a military nuclear program, and whether this position is merely an “experimental” one for testing the international ground, just like in the negotiations with Iran, remains to be seen.

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