Riyadh Reclaims its Place in Active International Politics

Despite attempts by the current US administration to belittle the role of Saudi Arabia in international affairs and authority of the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, Riyadh is confidently winning back the universal recognition and becoming an increasingly active participant of the recent events.

For over seven decades of partnership Washington has been the major guarantor of the Kingdom’s safety and in their turn most of Saudi monarchs coordinated their actions in energy issues closely with the United States. Political alliance with Riyadh has been a pillar of Washington’s Middle Eastern strategy. The US - Saudi Arabia relations have been regulated by the Quincy Agreement concluded in 1945 by the US president Franklin Roosevelt and the founder of the modern Saudi state King Abdulaziz aboard the American cruiser Quincy. The nature of the Agreement was fairly simple: the US shall guarantee safety of Saudi Arabia and the royal family, the American troops shall be stationed in the kingdom and the US shall provide the Saudi with the most advanced weaponry. Saudi Arabia it its turn shall guarantee energy safety of the US with uninterrupted supply of oil.

After the 1973 oil crisis Americans suggested a new agreement: the West shall assist in modernization of the oil industry and shall retain it at the highest level while sheiks wire their oil billions to the US and live off the interest. Thus the Arab monarchs essentially succumbed to “the golden calf.” In case the Arab leaders had attempted to pursue an independent policy, they’d have been shown that they would easily be bankrupted, stripped off their
power “shield” and become prey for then-strong Moscow-influenced Syria, Iran, Yemen, and Saddam’s Iraq.

This “interest balance” existed for several decades, whereas the US received Saudis as allies in the struggle against Arab left-wing nationalistic movement and the “communist block.” Analytical centers in the US and the UK developed the program “Islam Against Communism” as an off-shoot of the plan, devised by Henry Kissinger, to create an arc of instability near the USSR southern borders. Washington and London greenlit the Saudi propaganda of Sunni Islam in its most radical sectarian version of Wahhabism. Saudi Arabia (and incidentally Turkey) became London’s and Washington’s tool in destabilizing a large region, from the Northern Africa to Iran, resulting in a new mutation of radical “black” Islam, a “Caliphate.” As a result, chaos was unleashed in a number of states that kept left-wing nationalistic ideology and supported stability in this vast region. This is predominantly Iraq, Libya, Syria, as well as Egypt.

However, after Saudi Arabia with the support of the US and other Western states tore apart these Middle Eastern countries, the whirlpool of chaos touched Saudi Arabia which got stuck in the wars in Syria and Yemen.

Lately Arab monarchies who have long been on the list of privileged allies of the US clearly started to realize that they were in jeopardy. They learned that Washington freely get rid of “friends” showing that the American Empire has “no constant enemies or constant friends, only constant interests.” This was in particular illustrated by the 2011 events, when, as members of the royal family of Saudi Arabia believe, they managed to save the reigning family of Bahrain Al Khalifa only due to direct military involvement of Riyadh, while the US, despite the 5th US Navy fleet being in Manama harbor, did nothing. From 2013 to 2014 Obama refused to send American Air Force to bombard Syria despite Riyadh insistence. Moreover, the US stopped sending some types of weaponry to “moderate” Syrian armed irregular troops. Then anti-Iran rhetoric saw a sharp decline, even though the US and Israel actually threatened Tehran with war which aligned with Saudi interests. Since then Saudi Arabia’s distrust towards the US has only grown worse.

This distrust was cemented by Jeffrey Goldberg’s article The Obama Doctrine published on March 16, 2016 in the Atlantic Magazine. The article contained president Obama’s comments publicized for the first time including not only harsh criticism of Saudi Arabia but also doubts over purposefulness of the further strategic partnership between the US and the Saudis. It was made clear to Riyadh that Washington was not going to protect Saudi Arabia as before in case of conflict with Iran, nor would it assume an openly pro-Saudi position.

After the power in the Saudi Kingdom was consolidated by Mohammed bin Salman, the relations of the two countries became more strained. During his presidential campaign Biden called Saudi Arabia an “outcast.” Then he denied Arabia support in the war against Hussites in Yemen, brought the US to the negotiating process with the main opponent of Riyadh - Iran, and attempted to isolate the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (the actual monarch) under the pretext of his direct involvement in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi and support for Donald Trump presidential bid. The US president tried not to interact with the crown prince directly when discussing crucial issues.

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia expedited development of close ties to Russia, China, and India and decided to revise its previous foreign policy preferences, as the authorities of the Kingdom understood that the there is no relying on the US. In order to demonstrate Riyadh’s independence from the US, the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman leaked to the media clearly painful for the White House information on readiness to convert the oil trade with China into yuan, announced action coordination with Russia within OPEC and cutting investment in the US, and even went as far as to make negative comment towards America.

In the wake of Russian special denazification operation in Ukraine the Biden administration, according to the US media, attempted to hold direct talks between the US president and the crown prince Mohammed. The head of the US tried to discuss possibility of increasing oil exports in order to stabilize the prices with the factual ruler of the Kingdom, but the crown prince simply declined the calls, say insiders of the Western publications. The Saudi Arabia refuses to denounce Russia’s actions in Ukraine, instead the Foreign Affairs Minister of the Kingdom talks to his Russian colleague Sergey Lavrov, discussing “ways to strengthen and consolidate” the relations.

Moreover, the Saudi party tries to hurt the US, which was clearly corroborated by the last week’s announcement by the Wall Street Journal sources that the crown prince Mohammed sent an invitation to visit the Kingdom to the General Secretary of the PRC Xi Jinping after the end of the holy month of Ramadan (May 2). Besides, allegedly the crown prince wants to give the same warm welcome to the leader of China, as the one he gave in 2017 to the then US president Donald Trump.

In this situation Washington attempted desperate steps to “appease Riyadh” by supplying Saudi Arabia with
additional antimissile systems Patriot and a significant number of antimissiles to ensure the Kingdom’s defense capability against intensifying attacks from Yemen. However, this has not had the effect Washington had hoped for, because Riyadh understands that many of today’s problems can be solved by other means and help not from the US but from Russia and China. Further proof of this is the official denial by the Foreign Ministry of Saudi Arabia on March 19 of an allegedly planned visit by the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to the Kingdom which Washington was clearly putting high stakes on.

The changing political priorities in Riyadh were marked by Saudis celebrating the Foundation Day on February 22 for the first time. The new celebration refers to 1727 when Muhammad bin Saud took the power into his hands and not to previously celebrated 1744 when Saud collaborated with Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, the reason behind extremism and regional expansion of the country.

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