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THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE GEOPOLITICS OF SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract. This article analyzes the formation of a new foreign policy strategy of Saudi Arabia in the context of the changing situation in the Middle East after the «Arab Spring» and the «nuclear deal» with Iran. It is shown that domestic political instability and economic problems due to falling oil prices have a great impact on the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. The struggle with Iran for dominance in the region is becoming the basis of its policy in the Middle East. It is noted that the complication of relations with the United States also has a significant impact on the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh in its geopolitics failed to neutralize the growth of Iran's influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen. In the Syrian conflict, Riyadh relies on supporting B. Assad's opponents, thus seeking to strengthen its position in the country and oust Iran and Russia from there. The confrontation with Iran forced Saudi Arabia to intervene in the civil war in Yemen and conduct a successful operation in Bahrain. The article shows Saudi Arabia's desire to keep Egypt, Jordan and a number of other countries in the region in the sphere of its foreign policy by providing financial assistance to these states. A conclusion is made about the economic, geopolitical and religious causes of the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran and Saudi Arabia's desire to strengthen its position in the Middle East and East Africa. A major breakthrough in this regard was Riyadh's acquisition of two islands in the Red Sea from Egypt.

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia, Iran, oil, foreign policy, Islam, regional security, conflict.*

Currently, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia plays an important regional and global role in the system of international relations. It is actually the leader of the Arab world and can play an important role on the world stage.

Like any state, Saudi Arabia has its own geopolitical interests, which in tandem with the United States in the region play an important

geopolitical role. First of all, the most important for them are relations with the Persian Gulf countries, which are part of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Persian Gulf. Next in importance are relations with the Arab countries - members of the League of Arab States. Much attention is paid to the entire Islamic world as a whole. In order to implement the unity of Muslim countries, as well as to protect and defend their interests, the Organization of the Islamic Conference was created on the initiative of Saudi Arabia in 1969. Working to resolve many of its main international and domestic issues, Saudi Arabia is increasingly strengthening its position as a significant subject of world politics. This is due to a number of objective factors.

At the beginning of the 21st century, radical political changes are taking place in the Middle East. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, then the «Arab Spring» plunged the region into instability. Iraq, Yemen, Syria are mired in the anarchy of civil wars. The result of these processes is the emergence and growth of ISIS. The situation in the region was complicated by oil price hikes in 2014-2016. In this situation, Saudi Arabia had to build a new foreign policy strategy in the Middle East. Traditionally, the political elite of Saudi Arabia pursued a cautious foreign policy, focusing on close military and political cooperation with the United States. Saudi Arabia guaranteed the United States a stable world oil market and regular supplies of Arabian oil to North America. The exception was the events of 1973, when, during another Arab-Israeli conflict, the Arabian states, including Saudi Arabia, imposed an embargo on oil supplies to the United States and other Western countries. The personification of this policy was the previous king of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah, who ruled the country since 2005. After his death in 2015, Salman became the new monarch of the country. The new leadership of Saudi Arabia is beginning to show more initiative in pursuing an independent regional policy. This circumstance

is explained by both serious domestic political changes within the country and changes in the balance of power on the world stage, including in the Middle East.

In recent years, there has been some tension in relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia. President Barack Obama has repeatedly made remarks in his speeches that have irritated Riyadh. Washington is becoming less and less dependent on oil supplies from Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the «shale revolution» makes the United States and Saudi Arabia competitors. In 2016, the US Congress lifted the ban on oil exports from the United States. Saudi Arabia was greatly irritated by statements by a number of congressmen and senators about the need to declassify 28 pages of the US intelligence report on the role of Saudi Arabia in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. According to a number of experts, these documents may contain information reflecting the connection of a number of representatives of the ruling dynasty and business circles of Saudi Arabia with Al-Qaeda. Some congressmen called for Saudi Arabia to be held accountable for the terrorist attack of September 11. Previously, such calls were absent from Washington. In response, Saudi Arabia threatened to sell off \$750 billion in US securities owned by the kingdom if Washington tried to hold the kingdom accountable for the events of 2001. It should not be forgotten that Saudi Arabia is one of the largest consumers of US military-industrial complex products. In 2010 alone, the kingdom purchased \$60 billion in weapons from the US. Therefore, in the event of a serious deterioration in US relations with Saudi Arabia, their economy could suffer significant losses. The country's public and part of the political establishment are beginning to feel burdened by the role of the US «policeman» in the Middle East. The authoritarian regime in Riyadh does not evoke sympathy in liberal circles. The US did not approve of Riyadh's intervention in Yemeni affairs. In turn, Saudi Arabia condemned the compromise agreement between the United States and Tehran, since the «nuclear deal», in Riyadh's opinion, strengthens Iran's economic and military-political potential. In these circumstances, Riyadh made several overtures to Russia, including in matters of

purchasing Russian weapons. However, they should be treated with great skepticism. They are most likely a tool for pressuring the United States. In Saudi Arabia, the «Arab Spring» caused a negative response, which, according to a significant part of the kingdom's residents, became a provocation by the United States and Israel against the Arab world. The fact that the King of Saudi Arabia did not come to meet the US President at the airport for the first time during B. Obama's visit to the country on April 21, 2016, speaks to the tension in relations between the two countries. Nevertheless, Washington and Riyadh are interested in maintaining close contacts in the economic sphere and in matters of military security, which does not exclude differences between the two countries on a number of issues in world politics. Therefore, when forming its own Middle East policy, Riyadh looks less and less to Washington.

Saudi Arabia's decisive foreign policy is confirmed by the creation of a coalition under its auspices that intervened in the civil war in Yemen. International analysts believe that the Minister of Defense, the son of King Salman, Mohammed bin Salman is behind these actions. Mohammed is one of the ambitious politicians in Riyadh who are seeking to strengthen their own authority in the country and beyond. The «small victorious war» in Yemen is a good tool for this. The war in Yemen is of great strategic importance for Saudi Arabia. More than a third of the population of Yemen are Shiites who are seeking to strengthen their own political influence in Sana'a with the support of Iran. For Saudi Arabia itself, the problem of the Shiite minority is a pressing one. Shiite protests pose a danger to the ruling dynasty in Riyadh. It is no coincidence that the authorities harshly suppress any manifestations of Shiite opposition within Saudi Arabia. This is evidenced by the execution of 47 people in early 2016, including the famous Shiite theologian Nimr al-Nimr, who enjoyed great popularity in the country. Riyadh's actions were condemned by Iran, Iraq, the Shiite movements of Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen, and supported by the states of the Arabian Peninsula, Sudan, Djibouti, and, most importantly, Egypt. A victory for the Shiites in Yemen could have unpredictable consequences for Saudi Arabia itself. Yemen borders Saudi

Arabia, which creates the preconditions for the Shiites of Yemen and Iran to support the Shiites of the Arabian kingdom. In addition, Yemen is becoming a sphere of conflict between the interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh cannot allow Tehran to strengthen its position in Yemen, as this will become the basis for the creation of a regional «Shiite crescent» that will cause fear among the Persian monarchs. Instability in Yemen poses major economic risks for Saudi Arabia, as Yemen controls a significant flow of oil exports from the Arabian Peninsula through the Red Sea to Europe. The balance of power in the Middle East will be determined for many years to come by the growing conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both countries are seeking to act as regional leaders. Initially, it seemed that Riyadh's position was more preferable. However, in recent years, the situation has begun to acquire an unfavorable character for Saudi Arabia. Iran has recovered from the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, and, most importantly, Tehran has withdrawn from the total system of international sanctions. Foreign policy turmoil in the Middle East has benefited Iran. The US military operation against Saddam Hussein effectively led to the collapse of Iraq, Tehran's traditional adversary in the second half of the 20th century. Shiites, Iran's allies, have established control over southern and partly central Iraq. The parliament, government, and partly the army of Iraq are either under the control of the Shiites or under their close attention. Iran has clearly achieved great success in Iraq. Saudi Arabia's attempts to neutralize Iran's growing influence in Iraq have not yielded results. Iran dominates Lebanon. The conduit of Iranian influence in the country is the Hezbollah group. Saudi Arabia relied on the Lebanese billionaire, born in Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister S. Hariri, who was in power from 2009 to 2011, but Riyadh failed to weaken Iran's position in Lebanon. Since the beginning of 2016, Saudi Arabia has stopped funding the Lebanese army and announced a possible reduction in economic aid to the country, which has led to a further decline in Saudi Arabia's authority in Beirut. In Yemen, Iran's allies, the Houthis, have achieved significant success.

Bahrain was a country where Saudi Arabia achieved positive results with significant

reputational losses. On February 14, 2011, in this small state in the Persian Gulf, under the influence of the «Arab Spring», protest demonstrations of the Shiite majority began, demanding democratization of society. In March of this year, Saudi troops and UAE police units entered Bahrain to suppress the unrest and maintain stability. Riyadh suspected that Iran was behind the events in Bahrain. Riyadh considers Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE, and Oman to be its strategic allies, so Saudi Arabia will by any means seek to preserve political regimes loyal to it in these states. In the Syrian conflict, Tehran and Riyadh found themselves on opposite sides of the barricades. Tehran supports the government of B. Assad, and Riyadh supports the opposition. The «Battle for Syria» is of great importance for both countries, the winner will significantly increase its own dominance in the Middle East. If the opposition wins, Saudi Arabia will oust Iran from Syria and weaken its position in Lebanon. This will be compensation for the defeat in Iraq and the protracted military actions in Yemen. It is quite remarkable that Iran and Saudi Arabia accuse each other of creating ISIS. It should be emphasized that the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for influence in the Middle East, in addition to geopolitical and religious background, also has a national coloring. Iran is a country of Persians, an ancient people with a unique culture and a glorious historical past. Saudi Arabia claims to be the representative of the interests of all Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula, in addition, it is the custodian of Muslim shrines. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, there is currently a rise in Persian and Arab nationalism. Both countries live by Sharia law, but in Iran the political system of Saudi Arabia is perceived as a backward medieval regime where lawlessness and obscurantism reign. By inciting conflict, some political circles in Riyadh and Tehran are seeking to solve their own domestic political problems. In particular, according to CNN analyst Bobby Ghosh, in Tehran conservatives are trying to neutralize reformers and nullify the results of the deal on the «nuclear program», while in Riyadh the conflict with Iran is becoming a mechanism in the struggle of various groups in the Saudi dynasty for power and the right to resolve complex economic problems.

In the near future, it is difficult to expect a compromise in relations between the two countries. Warlike rhetoric and mutual accusations have found their way into the public consciousness. Large sections of the Sunni population of Saudi Arabia support the government's anti-Iranian course. In turn, anti-Saudi sentiments are growing in Iran. It is no coincidence that demonstrators took an active part in the destruction of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Tehran in January 2016, which further complicated relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran and led to the rupture of diplomatic relations between them. As already noted, Riyadh's foreign policy ambitions are fueled by growing internal problems. The fall in oil prices has highlighted some economic and social problems in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh itself refused to reduce oil production at an OPEC meeting in April 2014 to maintain high prices. Saudi Arabia thus sought to retain a significant share of the world market and even increase it, while simultaneously solving foreign policy problems. At the same time, the country's state budget deficit reached 15%, its gold and foreign exchange reserves are melting, mainly used to support the real to dollar exchange rate and maintain social programs. In April 2016, Saudi Arabia's gold and foreign exchange reserves fell to \$592 billion. The country is losing oil markets in the United States, China, where it has been supplanted by Russia, and India. In these circumstances, the country's government has taken a number of emergency measures, including the partial privatization of the Aramco oil company, raising fuel prices within the country, getting rid of a number of assets abroad, and turning to external borrowing. In addition, the country is taking an ambitious course to rid its economy of total dependence on oil exports by 2030. Saudi Arabia's economic problems pose a threat to its active policy in the Middle East. Egypt, Jordan, and a number of other Arab countries receive significant aid from Saudi Arabia. It is no coincidence that the Egyptian army corps protects the northern border of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh will have to reduce the amount of aid, increasingly resorting to lending to its partners in the region, which cannot irritate Cairo, Amman, Khartoum, etc. The war in Yemen, which has already cost the kingdom \$5.3 billion, has led to serious expenses.

Saudi Arabia has a difficult relationship with Egyptian President Al-Sisi. Cairo is in no hurry to send its troops to Yemen, and Riyadh is greatly concerned about Egypt's growing cooperation with Russia, including in the military-technical sphere. Incidentally, Cairo buys a considerable portion of Russian weapons with Saudi money. Al-Sisi is in no hurry to unconditionally support Saudi Arabia's position on the Syrian issue. At the same time, on April 8, 2016, during the visit of the King of Saudi Arabia to Cairo, Egypt signed an agreement to sell two Egyptian islands, Tiran (80 sq. km) and Sanafir (33 sq. km) in the Red Sea to Riyadh for \$25 billion. Apparently, these territorial changes were agreed upon in advance with Israel and the United States. Despite the unpopularity of this agreement in Egypt, its authorities are in dire need of financial assistance from Saudi Arabia. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that Riyadh was generally loyal to the military coup that brought Al-Sisi to power, which undoubtedly contributed to this agreement. With this agreement, Saudi Arabia strengthened its geopolitical position not only in the Red Sea basin, but in the Middle East as a whole. The acquired islands allow the Saudis to control the Strait of Aqaba and thus significant flows of world trade carried out through the Suez Canal. Jordan is becoming even more dependent on Saudi Arabia because the islands block its access to the sea through the port of Aqaba.

Saudi Arabia is seeking to increase Egypt's dependence on Riyadh by taking advantage of its problems. Egypt was the leader of the Arab world throughout the second half of the 20th century. Riyadh is currently trying to take this place, pushing Egypt into the background. Saudi Arabia, which has significant economic potential, is one of the small states in terms of population (more than 31 million people). This weakens its military potential. Relying on the military and political potential of Egypt (more than 85 million people), Saudi Arabia will be able to dominate the Middle East. The Saudi Arabia-Egypt alliance will become a powerful counteraction in the region to Iran and Israel. At the same time, one should not agree with the opinion of a number of experts that Egypt is losing its independence of political course, becoming more dependent on Saudi Arabia. Egypt has gone through a difficult

period in its history, associated with the fall of the regime of H. Mubarak, the rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood and the subsequent military coup. During the «turmoil», a strong blow was dealt to the country's economy, its political prestige, and Egypt is also experiencing a population boom. The country is in dire need of investment, financial assistance and loans to develop the national economy. Therefore, Cairo is trying to maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia, which has colossal financial resources. After acquiring the islands, Saudi Arabia announced the construction of a bridge across the Red Sea, which will connect it with Egypt. The implementation of this project promises significant economic benefits for both Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The bridge will increase the flow of pilgrims to holy places, expand economic ties between the states of the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa. One more important point should not be discounted. At present, China is pursuing an active policy in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Djibouti, etc. It is quite possible that in the future, China's interests may clash with those of Egypt and Saudi Arabia in Sudan and a number of other Arab states in Africa. Under these circumstances, Cairo and Riyadh will have to act together. The Red Sea Bridge may come in very handy in this regard.

In the situation with the sale of the islands, the US position is quite understandable. However, Israel's consent to sell the islands is at first glance puzzling. Israel and Saudi Arabia do not have diplomatic relations, and will not have them until an independent Palestinian state is created. Saudi Arabia finances the Palestinian national movement. At the same time, according

to Israeli journalists, there are channels for secret meetings and information exchange between the authorities of Saudi Arabia and Israel. In the conditions of instability in the Middle East, these exchanges are necessary for both states. Israeli goods through Palestine, Lebanon and Cyprus get to Saudi Arabia. And most importantly, Israel and Saudi Arabia have one common enemy - Iran. In Jerusalem, as in Riyadh, Tehran is considered the main source of instability in the region, posing a threat to the national security of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, Saudi Arabia found itself in a very difficult situation. The changing balance of power in the Middle East, the complication of relations with the United States, and domestic political contradictions have required the kingdom to develop a new foreign policy strategy, centered on the confrontation with Iran. Saudi Arabia is ready to prevent the growth of Iran's hegemony in the region by any means necessary, but neither Riyadh nor Tehran will bring matters to an open armed conflict. Saudi Arabia is trying to consolidate its influence on the leading states of the Middle East using economic resources. In addition to strengthening its own positions in the region, it seeks to prevent the creation of a «Shiite belt» under the auspices of Iran. Relations with the United States will undoubtedly largely determine Saudi Arabia's policy in the Middle East. Despite the cooling of contacts between Washington and Riyadh, the United States needs Saudi Arabia to maintain its dominance in the Persian Gulf, and the Kingdom of Saud is interested in military-technical cooperation with the United States and the presence of American troops in the region.

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БЛИЖНИЙ ВОСТОК В ГЕОПОЛИТИКЕ САУДОВСКОЙ АРАВИИ

Резюме

Благодаря своей богатой истории и ключевой глобальной роли Саудовская Аравия активно действует на международном уровне. Экономические и социальные преобразования дают королевству вести активную внешнюю политику, что позволяет занимать в регионе важную геостратегическую позицию для сохранения собственного геополитического пространства.

Полагаем, что недавнее соглашение между Саудовской Аравией и Ираном, заключенное при посредничестве Китая, повлияет на региональную политику. Однако больше внимания следует уделить пониманию факторов, которые могут позволить Саудовской Аравии и Ирану преодолеть свои политические и религиозные разногласия и сохранить восстановленные связи.

Поскольку обе страны работают над созданием экономических возможностей, общие экономические интересы могут скрепить возобновленные отношения. Наследный принц Мухаммед бин Салман пообещал начать новую эру экономических реформ, что является жизненно важным приоритетом для Королевства. Иран, с другой стороны, долгое время чувствовал себя отстающим из-за экономических санкций. Эти две динамики могут объединиться и проложить путь к будущему процветанию обеих стран.

Кроме того, присутствие взаимно доверенного партнера в качестве посредника между Саудовской Аравией и Ираном может способствовать более тесному сотрудничеству. Саудовская Аравия поддерживает прочные политические и экономические отношения с Китаем, а Пекин является крупнейшим торговым партнером Королевства. Более того, Китай поддержал Иран, несмотря на введенные США санкции, укрепил торговые отношения и поддержал Иран на международных форумах. Для самого Китая постоянное посредничество имеет решающее значение, поскольку оно укрепит имидж Пекина как мирового миротворца и создаст благоприятную среду для дальнейших китайских инвестиций.

Враждебность между Ираном и Саудовской Аравией привела к ряду конфликтов, включая войны посредников в ряде стран, таких как Йемен и Сирия. Поэтому для стабильности на Ближнем Востоке крайне важно держать посредников под контролем, поскольку эти группы способны препятствовать дипломатическому прогрессу. Другие внешние влияния, включая американские и российские интересы, также могут стать препятствием для развития отношений и долгосрочной эффективности соглашения.

В 2023 году Саудовская Аравия стала свидетелем заметного присутствия на региональной и международной аренах в политическом и дипломатическом плане. Королевство принимало у себя множество саммитов и встреч высокого уровня, предоставляя площадку для обсуждения различных глобальных кризисов и проблем. Это стало значительным вкладом в политический дискурс, отражающим приверженность Саудовской Аравии решению насущных проблем как на региональном, так и на глобальном уровнях. Рассматриваемый наблюдателями как начало новой эры в геополитическом видении Саудовской Аравии, Эр-Рияд умело преодолел несколько кризисов в регионе и во всем мире.