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Will Moscow and Riyadh Get Closer?

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The Islamic State has made public the plans to divide Saudi Arabia into five parts. For years the Kingdom has been calmly watching the terrorist group wreak havoc and commit acts of mass murder in Syria and Iraq. Now it looks like the situation is going through changes. 250 Islamic State militants have been arrested in the country during the recent two months. The majority of them come from Saudi Arabia. It means the Islamic States has crossed the Saudi border. Soon the radicals will fill the group's ranks to strengthen its presence in the Kingdom. Under the circumstances Russia has come up with an initiative to join efforts countering the contemporary threats and challenges, especially those that come from international terrorists such as the Islamic State and other radical groups. Russia wants Saudi Arabia, a leading Arab state, to be its partner. It's ready for a dialogue. Will Riyadh meet Moscow half way? This April new Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Russia Abdulrahman al-Rassi presented his credentials. "Even brothers may

disagree,” he said at the ceremony. His appointment gives hope for improvement of bilateral relations. In an interview (1) he avoided the issue of Syria which is an apple of discord. Russia has no questions to ask concerning this problem, it’s all clear - Saudi Arabia has applied great efforts to support the armed opposition, it has recognized the coalition as a legitimate government and inspired military intervention against Damascus. The Ambassador expressed concern over Iran which promotes instability in many states. Saudi Arabia sides with Israel on the issue of Iranian nuclear program, the both states refuse to discuss peace with Tehran. Tel Aviv and Riyadh don’t trust US President Obama; they do their best to prevent the Geneva talks from succeeding. Saudi Arabia does not approve the Moscow’ decision to sell S-300 air defense systems to Iran. According to Russia’s view, the delivery of S-300 is the best way to protect the Iranian air space and thus prevent a new conflict in the region. Saudi Arabia believes the deal will tip the balance in favor of Iran.

Nevertheless, with King Salman becoming the head of state Saudi Arabia has entered a period of transformation. There is ground to believe the Kingdom will review its foreign policy priorities, including the relations with Russia. Until recently the bilateral relationship had been stable. The both sides had strived to keep up the balance in the region. But the Kingdom is an ally of the United States. It spoiled the things. This factor negatively affects the bilateral relationship. Washington has made the Persian Gulf states take its side in the confrontation with Tehran. As an economic major, Saudi Arabia has assumed a leading position in the alliance. It has become deeply involved in the US-incited struggle for regional leadership. The friendship with the United States has brought no dividends. The war in Yemen damaged the country’s position. The strategic mistake has weakened the Kingdom’s clout. It all makes Saudi Arabia seek restoration of full-fledged partnership with Russia.

Neither of the countries benefits from the divisions that negatively affect the relationship. The trade turnover was only \$1, 16 billion in 2014. The Saudi exports to Russia were valued at \$267 million with imports reaching \$863 million. Actually local markets are closed to Russian companies. The economic cooperation could make strides if it were not for political hindrances. President Vladimir Putin went to Riyadh in February 2007. The agreements on bilateral cooperation were signed (aid traffic, double taxation on profits and capital, cooperation in culture, information exchange and coordination of banking sector activities) have never been brought into life. Political reasons prevailed to make Saudi Arabia reject cooperation in the field of nuclear energy and space research for peaceful purposes.

Russian business is set to make a breakthrough. Around 30 companies are ready to invest into Saudi Arabia. Large investments projects are being studied to include oil, industry, agriculture, medicine and education. In Saudi Arabia government support is important for developing relations with foreigners and that’s something Saudi business partners lack in case of Russia. For instance, to protest the Russia’s stance on Syria Saudi Arabia formally refused to receive a team of Russian businessmen who came to the Kingdom for meeting partners in the June of 2012. No matter that, Riyadh easily found \$3 billion to pay for the Egypt’s military deal with Russia. The money went to Russian budget. The positions of the both sides on Egypt coincide to bring them closer while the differences on Syria and Iran hinder political cooperation. Seeking compromises is a way out.

Russia is going through a new phase of its relationship with Arab states and the entire Muslim world. It views the Middle East as a foreign policy priority. Moscow continues unrelenting efforts to manage regional conflicts and improve ties with the states of the region, including the relationship Saudi Arabia which leaves much to be desired. Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov visited Riyadh on May 26-27 to meet his counterpart Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir. He was received by King Salman. The bilateral relationship and the burning issues related to Middle East security, especially Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Palestine, topped the agenda. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported in a statement (2) that the parties exchanged opinions on a wide range of issues related to dynamics of progress in the bilateral relationship. The active participation of Russian and Saudi businessmen in the Russian Regions Road Show taking place in Jeddah demonstrates the opportunities for bilateral relationship. The parties realize that businessmen of the both countries need government support to develop cooperation. In recent years Russia has moved from the 60th to 23d place as an exporter to the Kingdom. Now Russia has a chance to join ten leading trade partners of Saudi Arabia. Perhaps economic ties will create conditions for a breakthrough on the way of establishing full-fledged political partnership.