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## Russia, Saudi Arabia: New Turn in Relationship

Boris DOLGOV

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Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (born 31 December 1935), the King of Saudi Arabia, has accepted President Vladimir Putin's invitation to visit Russia, Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman said on Thursday, June 18. The event may become a turning point in the relationship. The Prince said that his country considered Russia an important partner and recalled that the Soviet Union was the first country to recognize the Kingdom in 1926.

Karim Khakimov, a well-known Soviet diplomat, an orientalist and expert on the Middle East, became the first ambassador to Saudi Arabia to greatly contribute into development of relations, reaching mutual understanding and learning each other's history and traditions.

Today Saudi Arabia is a leading regional power. The Kingdom acts as the spiritual leader of Muslim world hosting the two main holy sites - Mecca and Medina that played an important role in the life of Prophet Muhammad. The Hajj is an annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, and a mandatory religious duty for believers that must be carried out at least once in their lifetime by all adult Muslims who are physically and financially capable of undertaking the journey, and can support their family during their absence. It is a pillar of Islam. The gathering during Hajj is considered the largest annual gathering of people in the world.

The Kingdom is the largest member of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, the seven Arab states which border the Persian Gulf, namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. All of these nations (with the exception of Iraq) are part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for the Arab States of the Gulf. The countries coordinate their activities in many areas. The Peninsula Shield Force (or Peninsula Shield) is the military side of the Cooperation Council intended to deter, and respond to, military aggression against any of the GCC member states. The rich in oil Saudi Kingdom is a leading member of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The profits received from oil exports allow Saudi Arabia to boost its economic, social and education infrastructure, as well as invest abroad, including the developed states of the West.

Salman was crowned as the new king of Saudi Arabia on 23 January 2015 following the death of his half-brother, King Abdullah. In April 2015 King Salman appointed a nephew as new heir-presumptive and made his young son second in line to rule. By making Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, 55, crown prince and Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman, 30, deputy crown prince, King Salman has effectively decided the line of succession for decades to come in the world's top oil exporter. The announcement means the kingship will pass to a new generation for the first time since 1953, when the throne passed from the founder of the dynasty, King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, to the first of six of his sons who have held it since. Almost all powers under the king are now concentrated in the hands of the pair.

The reform was timely. The old system gave rise to a host of problems and social upheavals. Like other Arab states, the Kingdom also has problems (perhaps, not as acute as in other Arab countries, but still pressing enough) which could potentially provoke Arab Spring-type of upheavals that shook the Middle East in 2011-2012. Thus the incumbent ruler gave younger heirs a chance while preserving the succession to the throne. Time will tell if the system works. There is competition between groups inside the royal family, though it never comes to grips.

King Salman has also introduced changes in the government structure. Muqrin bin Abdulaziz (born 15 September 1945), the 35th and the youngest surviving son of King Abdulaziz, the founder of dynasty, was replaced as crown prince. The new crown prince, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, is the first of his generation to be thrust into the highest echelons of government, will continue to act as interior minister but will also play the role of deputy prime minister as crown prince. His age means he is likely to be a hugely important role for decades to come in Saudi Arabia, and makes him the most likely to be the next king. Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is overseeing the Saudi air strikes in Yemen, will remain defence minister as he takes on the title of deputy crown prince. He also heads a massive council that oversees all economic and development issues. In another big shift, Salman replaced veteran Foreign Minister Prince Saud

al-Faisal, who had served in the role since October 1975, with the kingdom's Washington ambassador Adel al-Jubeir, the first non-royal to hold the post.

The replacement of the veteran foreign minister by a younger non-royal, who is currently the Saudi ambassador to the US and a long-time Washington insider, strengthens the sense of generational change. The most senior woman in government, Nora al-Fayez, was sacked from her post as deputy education minister for girls, the decree said. Shunned by ultraconservatives, she was strongly pushing to try to get physical education on the curriculum for girls in Saudi public schools.

The reform of succession and shifts in the government should not be viewed as drastic change of policy. Giving a chance to younger generation has been a burning issue since a long time ago. The new assignments, especially appointing the new foreign chief, prove that the main guidelines of policy remain unchanged.

The decision of new Saudi leadership to develop the relations with Russia can go beyond the bilateral relationship changing the situation in the Middle and Near East, or even influencing the global trends. The relations had been developing smoothly till the Syrian crisis on which the Russia's and the Saudi Kingdom's positions differ. The relations were negatively affected by Kingdom's 2011 intervention in Bahrain to quell the Shia uprising and the air strikes against the Houthis in Yemen. No matter differences on regional conflicts, Saudi Arabia has made attempts to improve the ties. Saudi delegations have visited Russia recently. The guests from Saudi Arabia told Russian RIA Novosti agency that, no matter how different their stances on Syria are, the both parties could boost mutually beneficial cooperation following the pattern of Russia and Turkey relationship.

There are reasons behind the Saudi Arabia's aspiration to spur the development of bilateral cooperation. First, Russia has recently returned its place among leading world powers. It has significant global clout— a factor to reckon with when it comes to addressing regional problems. Second, Saudi Arabia followed the policy imposed by the United States supporting the armed radicals, like the ones confronting the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria. The policy has resulted in emergence of extremist Islamic State posing a threat to the security of Saudi Arabia.

The same thing has happened in Yemen. The coalition of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia launched an air campaign against the Houthis under the pretext of defending the government of toppled Yemen's President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The Houthis are supported by the majority of population, as well as Iran. Condemned internationally, the air bombardments led to great death toll among civilians and brought about no positive results. Saudi Arabia failed to quell the Houthis uprising. The Yemeni Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also poses a threat to Saudi Arabia. The US-led policy has failed to effectively address the security threats. Common sense made Saudi Arabia offer a five-day cease-fire to the Houthis in May, so that the humanitarian problems could be tackled while the Houthis and the representatives of the overthrown President started talks in Geneva with the United Nations as intermediary. The talks led to no results.

Saudi Arabia appears to review its pro-US policy switching to multi-dimensional political

course, including cooperation with Russia. What is especially important - Russia could be an intermediary in the process of improving the Saudi Arabia's relations with Iran. Iran has stated on a number of occasions that it was ready to meet Saudi Arabia halfway.

The Kingdom's intent to improve the relations was confirmed during the June 2015 visit to Russia of delegation led by Saudi Arabian Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman. He was met by President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of 2015 St. Petersburg's International Economic Forum. The Saudi delegation included deputy head of the Saudi Arabian Navy, Admiral Ibrahim Nasir. Visiting the Army-2015 'Military Supermarket' he said that his country is interested in Russian ships, particularly the new Steregushchy-class corvette. *«Yes, we are interested, that's why we are here, and we are not only talking about the navy. We are interested in frigates, corvettes and guard ships. It's too early to compare prices, evaluate logistic and then we can make actual decisions»*, the Admiral said.

Bilateral economic cooperation, the situation in the Middle East, including the conflict in Syria and the threat posed by the Islamic State, hit the agenda of President Putin's talks with Prince Mohammad bin Salman. The visit by top Saudi official could be seen as a kind of a demarche against the United States, the country which ignored the St. Petersburg's forum and insists that anti-Russian sanctions should remain in force.

Russia is also interested in developing relations with Saudi Arabia. First, Saudi Arabia is one of leading Arab states along with Egypt and Algeria. The rapprochement will increase Russia's clout in the Arab and Muslim world, as well as bolster its international influence. Second, Saudi Arabia has vast financial resources. The relationship may bring in significant investments into Russian economy. Third, getting closer is a logical step on the part of both sides in view of common threat - the Islamic State.

Saudi Arabia may review its stance on some Middle East issues. With Russia acting as a go-between, it can improve ties with Syria and Iran – the countries also threatened by Islamic State. As the recent events have shown, the groups supported by Saudi Arabia, like, for instance, al-Nusra Front fighting the government of Bashar Assad in Syria, side with the Islamic State. They can hardly be considered as Saudi Arabia's friends.

Finally, by strengthening economic and military cooperation with Arab states Russia could strengthen its position while standing up to pressure and the sanctions imposed by the West. There is no prospect for the improvement of Russia-West relations in sight.