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IRAN'S REGIONAL POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Iran's main competitor and arguably opponent in the Middle East is certainly Saudi Arabia. This largest state in the Arabian Peninsula is a major competitor of Tehran in terms of both political and ideological leadership in the region. Iran and Israel have repeatedly been on the brink of direct military confrontation in recent years. These countries are hostile to each other, which is also revealing in diplomatic rhetoric.

That is why, developing Iran's nuclear program is certainly unacceptable for Israel, and it has been and remains Israel's main strategic target. Despite strong political and financial pressure from the US-Israel-Saudi Arabian triumvirate on Iran, official Tehran appears unwilling to tolerate any attempt by them to weaken its position in the region and will continue to actively engage in both the Yemeni and Syrian armed conflicts.

Keywords: Iran, Saudi Arabia, USA, Israel, The Middle East, Syria, Yemen.

The Middle East region, as a "tectonic" geopolitical area, is unambiguously a top priority for the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. The active (and not only) work of Iranian diplomacy in the Middle East, along with geopolitics, has also a historical nature and is mainly stipulated due to the immense interest in Iranian society. The spiritual, ideological, and political situation in the Middle East is important to the vast majority of Iranian society, as the region in their consciousness is perceived as one of the main historical cornerstones of Iranian civilization. Therefore, the situation in the Middle East and Iran's policy in this region nowadays can be considered one of the main topics of discussion in Iranian society.

Iran's main competitor and arguably opponent in the Middle East is certainly Saudi Arabia. This largest state in the Arabian Peninsula is a major competitor of Tehran in terms of both political and ideological leadership in the region. Based on the existing situation, Iranian intelligence agencies have recently been trying to destabilize the situation in the southern provinces of Saudi Arabia, which borders Yemen, populated by Shiites. Moreover, if the Houthis defeat the Saudis in Yemen, all of this could even set the whole part of southern Saudi Arabia on fire. Currently, several military towns or border points are under Houthi control in southern Saudi Arabia. In general, the role of the Houthis in the Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict is crucial. Iran is widely recognized as the main military ally and financial supporter of the Houthis, although official Tehran categorically denies this fact. Hezbollah, which is supported by Iran and recognized as a terrorist organization by the West, is also considered as an ally of the Houthis. Of course, in the face of such powerful partners, ignoring the Houthi factor in the region is hard to imagine. The incident, which took place in the region on September 14 last year, strengthens this opinion when the fire broke out as a result of an attack by drones on two oil terminals in Saudi Arabia. According to the BBC, the facilities have belonged to the state-owned company Aramco. It was the Yemeni Houthis who claimed responsibility for the explosion. And later, they threatened about repeated strikes on various strategic facilities, if al-Riyadh did not stop bombing the areas controlled by the Yemeni rebels¹.

¹ Aljazeera (2019). *Houthi drone attacks on 2 Saudi Aramco oil facilities spark fires.*

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/drones-hit-saudi-aramco-facilities-fires-190914051900472.html>>.

With this in mind, particularly, with the support of the Houthis by Tehran and Hezbollah, another major figure in the Middle East region, the State of Israel, is not hiding its concerns as well. Iran and Israel have repeatedly been on the brink of direct military confrontation in recent years. These countries are hostile to each other, which is also revealing in diplomatic rhetoric. In this regard, Iranian political and military leaders are particularly stand out. For example, like former Iranian presidents, active President Hassan Rouhani has threatened to destroy Israel several times¹. That is why, developing Iran's nuclear program is certainly unacceptable for Israel, and it has been and remains Israel's main strategic target. Therefore, Israel, as a direct geopolitical opponent of Iran, along with the United States, is an ally of Saudi Arabia in the region and supports it to become the leading state of the Islamic world.

Despite strong political and financial pressure from the US-Israel-Saudi Arabian triumvirate on Iran, official Tehran appears unwilling to tolerate any attempt by them to weaken its position in the region and will continue to actively engage in both the Yemeni and Syrian armed conflicts. Apparently, this was the purpose of the statement made in Tehran, that Iran intends to establish naval bases in Syria and Yemen, as well as to strengthen its military-naval components in the Persian and Oman Gulfs. Tehran's statement on the production of nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers served to strengthen its position in the region as well. However, it should be emphasized that the realization of such grand plans will be very difficult for Tehran without a strong ally. In such a case, it may focus on close cooperation with Moscow. At the same time, Tehran is interested in economic cooperation with Russia. In this regard, it is no coincidence that Tehran intends to involve Russian Gazprom in the project to build a large gas pipeline, which by the experts estimate will cost \$ 2.5 billion. According to preliminary calculations, the conversation is about getting 1 billion m³ natural gas daily. Iran shares this giant mine with Qatar. Clearly, such a situation increases competition between Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia for the supply of natural and liquefied natural gas².

However, at the same time, Tehran does not like the strengthening of Moscow's position in Syria. Initially, Tehran believed that the US goal in the region was rapid destruction of so-called the Islamic State with the help of the Kurds and their affiliated militias, which would have led to the creation of a unified Kurdistan state that would unite parts of Syria and Iraq. Such a scenario was categorically unacceptable for Iran. In this regard, it is not surprising that Tehran is dissatisfied with Moscow and Ankara, which are trying to reach an agreement with the Syrian armed opposition. Iran's political elite fully supports the control of the entire territory of Syria by President Bashar al-Assad and his supporters, which in itself precludes any possibility of a compromise with the Syrian opposition. Tehran was also dissatisfied with Russia's growing influence on-ground operations in Syria, where its role had previously dominated. Tehran has a similar attitude towards Ankara. In the end, Iran is dissatisfied with the Moscow-Ankara plan to redistribute Syrian territory and its political power, which is expected to weaken Shiite-Alawite positions in the region.

Various informed experts report that under the ideological, organizational, and financial influence of Iran, there are about 130 thousand soldiers in Syria. 30,000 of them are parts of the Shiite Expeditionary Force (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, etc.), and the remaining 100,000 belong to the Syrian National Defense Forces, which were created and trained by Iranian military advisers. Of course, some of these units are funded by local oligarchs and other private individuals. Some of the national defense forces are local branches of foreign, especially Iraqi Shiite, brigades, which are mainly composed of local Shiites. It can be said that throughout this process, the Lebanese Hezbollah appears to be a completely separate player that can take steps independently from Tehran or force them to correct their own decisions. Hezbollah also has its branches in Syria. Despite all this, in the end, all these groups are forced to play the role that Tehran dictates, because it is an unconditional ideological authority. At the same time, Tehran has a great influence on the activities of the military intelligence structures of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Finally, it is important to discuss the changes in the world caused by the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic, in terms of economy, as well as in terms of the transformation of international relations. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, the whole world appeared in quarantine one day. Iran is

¹ After Iran quashes riots, top general threatens to destroy Israel and US. *Times of Israel*.
<<https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-iranian-general-threatens-to-destroy-israel-us/>>.

² Qatar-Iran ties: Sharing the world's largest gas field. *Aljazeera*.
<<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/06/qatar-north-dome-iran-south-pars-glace-lng-gas-field-170614131849685.html>>.

facing serious difficulties in the face of increased resistance to multilateral and unbearable sanctions imposed by the United States and its initiators. Sanctions seriously hamper the import of medical equipment and other necessary hygiene items into the country, which itself prevents an effective fight against the virus. Also, the internal political confrontation between moderate and conservative camps poses serious difficulties in taking anti-crisis measures and mobilizing existing resources. At the same time, the public's distrust towards the government is growing, and the society is increasingly skeptical of its managerial competence in crisis management. Finally, it can be said that the crisis has a severe impact not only on Iran's domestic policy but on its foreign policy as well.

All this time the Islamic Republic has been trying to take advantage of the Coronavirus difficulties and to draw the attention of the world community on the negative impact of American sanctions on the lives of ordinary Iranians. This diplomatic-propaganda campaign, the ideologist of which was Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, has worked successfully as a tool to develop political support for the removal of existing sanctions. It is noteworthy that Zarif's well-packaged campaign has worked not only among US's Western partners but also in the United States itself. The rumored message that sanctions should not prevent countries, who are fighting against coronavirus infection, from supplying medical and humanitarian products has led to a promise by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell to send humanitarian aid of € 20 million to Iran. The EU has also supported Iran's offer to allocate \$ 5 billion under emergency financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund. However, the main point in this whole story was that the eleven senators of the Democratic Party of the United States demanded the easing of US sanctions against Iran¹.

At the same time, President Trump's administration has made it clear that it does not view the Coronavirus factor as a legitimate reason to soften its "maximum pressure" policy on Iran. Also, according to some reports, Washington has already decided to block Iran's application for a loan from the IMF. The U.S. government appears to be viewing the negative economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis as another additional factor that will eventually force the Islamic Republic of Iran to sit down at the negotiating table and to compromise a series of concessions, from Iran's nuclear missile program to its regional policy.

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