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How did Saudi Arabia's policy towards Iraq change in the past few months?

By Maged Srour

During the past few months, we saw an attempt by Saudi Arabia, in particular by the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, to tighten relations with Shia Arab politicians and authorities in the region. The event that underscored this attempt was the visit that the Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr made to Saudi Arabia on the 30th of July 2017, to meet with Prince Muhammad. This was a stunning news that shocked analysts who started talking of Saudi Arabia turning pages on its approach towards Shia politics in the region. A few months later, that idea was reinforced by an exchange of visits between the Saudi leadership and the government of Iraq. In retrospective it is not surprising that in 2015 Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Baghdad, after a 25-year break and that on February 2017 the Saudi foreign minister made a rare visit to Baghdad, the first official one to Iraq since 1990.

The regional and global powers are looking at this latest developments trying to understand its meaning: is Saudi Arabia trying to get closer to the Shia politics in the region including Iran? Or is this move part of a plot to roll back Tehran, through compromise with some Shia prominent leaders? The majority of analysts seems to agree with the second scenario.

Saudi Arabia, as other GCC countries in the region, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is deeply concerned about Iran's growing influence in Iraq, mainly after the regime change that occurred in Baghdad in 2003, which favored the rise of a Shia pro-Tehran government. Iraq then became one of the many battlefields of the broader "Cold War" between Tehran and Riyadh, with the two countries competing to gain influence in that country. Some analysts claim that Prince Mohammad thought that a meeting with al-Sadr could facilitate a dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, believing that the Saudi Crown Prince asked the Iraqis to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran. The reality might be the opposite as bin Salman is probably trying to reach out to the Shia Arabs in the region to distance them from Tehran. Mohammad bin Salman is aware that the Shiites represent the majority of the Iraqi population and this awareness is gradually leading the Kingdom to reaching out to the Shia leadership. The Saudi strategy is trying to attract the Shia Arab community by emphasizing the common belonging to the Arab world, in contrast with the Iranian influence.

To this end, Muqtada al Sadr has been identified as a useful interlocutor: in the past few years al Sadr has constantly been pro-independence and he has been trying to emphasize the need to rediscover a national Iraqi identity and contain growing Iranian influence. Al-Sadr had come to prominence in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq as a fierce opponent of the occupation, engaging a guerrilla campaign against United States (US) troops and against domestic rivals in the country, mainly the Sunni fighters. During the past few years, al Sadr has achieved a strong political prominence and today he emerged as a leader of the Shiite underclass. Moreover, after the visit made in July 2017 to Saudi Arabia, Al-Sadr flew to Abu Dhabi and he is now planning to visit Egypt. His trips to the Gulf and to Sunni Arab countries could be part of a long-term strategy that aims to diversify the movement's alignments in the region, but they could also be interpreted as part of a domestic strategy that aims to attract votes from the Sunni Iraqis. Realistically he might be interested in both. Nevertheless, al-Sadr's organization might not, in the long term, be equipped to engage in the governance of Iraq, as ultimately, but essentially, his organization is part of the problems that plague Iraq. Even if it is now disbanded and has been transformed into a social services organization, in an attempt to repair its reputation, the '*Mahdy Army*' led by al-Sadr was involved in the civil war, sectarian conflict and criminal atrocities in the country. Therefore, Al Sadr knows that if he wants to achieve a positive result in the next elections in 2018, he needs to secure a cross-sectarian domestic support, as well as a favorable regional context.

During the past months Riyadh had contacts with the official government of Baghdad, too. The Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi had visited Saudi Arabia before al-Sadr in June 2017 and he just made another trip to the Kingdom on 21 October 2017. During this latter trip, the two countries inaugurated the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council, a high-level institutionalized forum for dialogue. One of the main points of discussion was related to the funds necessary for the reconstruction of the Sunni cities devastated by the war, namely Mosul, Tikrit, Ramadi and Fallujah. Estimates say that such reconstruction might need approximately \$100 billion and Saudi Arabia is one of the few regional powers having the capacity to pitch them in. Politically, the bilateral relations are more sensitive. Before leaving Baghdad in June, Abadi had affirmed that Iraqis "don't want to be part of any axis", referring to an Iran-led Shia regional coalition and a Saudi-led Sunni coalition. This shows that apart from some political disagreements, Abadi and Sadr seem to share the common objective, which is to raise the importance of reawaken the Arab identity and the independence of Iraq in the region.