

Changing Gears: Saudi-Iraqi Relations Today


By Maged Srour

Over the past few months, there has been a clear attempt by Saudi Arabia, in particular by the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, to strengthen relations with Shia Arab politicians in the region. The event that underscored this attempt was the visit by Iraqi Shia cleric, Muqtada al Sadr, to Saudi Arabia on 30 of July 2017, to meet with Prince Muhammad. This news shocked analysts who begun talking of Saudi Arabia turning pages on its approach to 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 unsurprising 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.

Regional and global powers are looking at the latest developments and are trying to understand its meaning: is Saudi Arabia trying to get closer to Shia politicians in the region; including Iran? Or, is this move part of a strategy to roll back Tehran, through engaging with some Shia leaders, in a move to reinforce Arab nationalism rather than sect? The majority of analysts seems to agree with the second scenario.

Saudi Arabia, as other GCC countries, is deeply concerned about Iran's growing influence in Iraq, especially after the regime change that occurred in Baghdad in 2003, which favoured 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 Prince Mohamed is probably trying to reach out to the Shia Arabs in the region to distance them from Tehran.

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 emphasise 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 US troops and against domestic rivals in the country, mainly Sunni fighters. During the past few years, al-Sadr has achieved a strong political prominence and emerged as a leader of the Shia underclass. Moreover, after the July 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia, Al-Sadr flew to Abu Dhabi and he is now planning to visit Egypt. His visits 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 organisation might not, in the long term, be equipped to engage in the governance of Iraq, as ultimately, but essentially, his organisation is part of the problems that plague Iraq. Even if it is now disbanded and has been transformed into a services organisation, in an attempt to repair its reputation, the '*Mahdi 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 (2018), he needs to secure cross-sectarian domestic support, as well as a favourable regional context.

Over the past months Riyadh made contacts with the official government of Baghdad too. The Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, visited Saudi Arabia before al-Sadr in June 2017 and he just completed 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 institutionalised 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 contribute. Politically, bilateral relations are more sensitive. Before leaving Baghdad in June, Abadi affirmed that Iraqis 'don't want to be part of any axis', referring to an Iran-led Shia regional coalition or a Saudi-led Sunni coalition. This shows that apart from some political disagreements, Abadi and al-Sadr seem to share the common objective, which is to raise the importance of reawakening the Arab identity and the independence of Iraq in the region.