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Issue Brief

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Re-Building Bridges: Saudi Engagement with Iraq

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Several diplomatic visits have taken place between leaders of Saudi Arabia and Iraq in recent months. In February 2017, Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabia's minister of foreign affairs, visited Iraq. In June, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi visited Riyadh, followed by Iraqi Interior Minister Qassim al-Araji a month later.



Saudi Arabia's new Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, hosted Muqtada al-Sadr on July 30, leading to much speculation about how the visit fits into Iraqi politics, regional sectarian competition, and above all, Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Iraq and Saudi Arabia have long been considered opponents in the region, but a visit by the Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to Riyadh and a follow-up trip to the UAE further somewhat defrosted relations which had already been much improved by high-profile visits between the two countries. Previously known as a 'firebrand cleric' with a Shia populist and militant line in Iraq, the arrival in the Saudi capital of Sadr highlights a new level of engagement which could see Riyadh play a significant role in the rebuilding of the primarily Sunni cities of Mosul, Fallujah, Ramadi and Tikrit.

"This visit was an important step in ensuring that Iraq returns to the Arab fold and is supported in doing so by friendly partners," said the former Saudi minister of state Saad al-Jabri. "This necessitates limiting Tehran's continued attempts to dominate Iraq and spread sectarianism. Broader engagement between Riyadh and Baghdad will lead the way for enhanced regional support for Iraq, especially from the Gulf states. This is essential after the capture of Mosul from ISIS and as Iraq looks towards national reconstruction."¹

When Sadr came back to Iraq, one of the first things he did was to give an order to remove all anti-Saudi material in Iraqi streets, including any images, posters or banners with an anti-Saudi sentiment. This obvious move to gain favourability from Saudi Arabia signals a shifting relationship between the neighbours. It seems that Sadr sides with Saudi Arabia in the regional cold war between the Kingdom

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/18/saudi-arabia-talks-alliance-rebuild-iraq-return-arab-fold>

and Iran, and is more than willing to apply the influence he has to fortify relations between Baghdad and Riyadh. Nevertheless, Sadr's meeting with Saudi Arabia and the measures he has taken since his visit marks a new, and perhaps more prosperous relationship in the offing between Shia Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Baghdad and Riyadh had not exchanged ambassadors for twenty-five years until the hapless return of a Saudi envoy in 2015, which prompted a malicious series of allegations about responsibility for Iraq's insurgency and the broader regional chaos.

"This is a new beginning, a new page of Iraqi Saudi relations,"² said Ihsan Al Shameri, the head of the Political Thought Centre in Baghdad. "It was troubled and on edge in the past, especially during [the former prime minister] al-Maliki's rule. Now that the Saudis have found a non-sectarian political figure in Haider al-Abadi, they are willing to work together. They are no longer focused on a Shia-Sunni rift. Moreover, Iraq wants to 'return to the Arab fold' and the window to the Arab world is Saudi Arabia."³

Although still at an early stage, these meetings have raised the prospect of Saudi inclination to support war-ravaged Iraq, facilitate commerce and communications between the two countries, and re-open the massive pipelines that run through the Kingdom from Iraq to the Red Sea built during the Iran-Iraq War, but closed after Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. They also raise the possibility of meaningful Sunni political participation in post-ISIS Iraq.

Intra-Shia political competition in Iraq has reached a point at which it no longer makes sense to speak of a singular Shia bloc. This potential grip in Iraqi Shia politics would be a major accomplishment for Saudi Arabia, particularly given the grass-roots nature of Sadr's support.

A question arises as to why a similar hand is not extended in Syria. This may be because right now Syria is still an active war zone. Iraq is gaining ground on ISIS day by day. Hence, for the Saudis, Iraq is the most suitable way for countering Iran's influence in the region.

The optics do not make for an easy sell on either side, and there will be plenty of forces in both countries and in the broader region that will want to see any move toward an improvement in Iraqi-

² http://www.lse.co.uk/sharecast-news-article.asp?ArticleCode=26332136&ArticleHeadline=Iraq_looks_to_return_to_the_Arab_fold

³ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/why-time-was-right-for-iraq-and-saudi-arabia-to-focus-on-common-enemies-1.616447>

Saudi relations prevented. On the other hand, an attempt at Iraqi-Saudi understanding is being pushed at the highest level in both countries. One can only hope that whatever goodwill generated thus far will prove robust in the face of the mounting trials ahead.