



INAUGURATION OF THE SAUDI-IRAQI COORDINATION COUNCIL AND REX TILLERSON'S MIDDLE EAST TOUR

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



“What links Saudi Arabia to Iraq is not just geography and common interests, but ties of fraternity, blood, history and destiny”.¹ This was stated by King Salman of Saudi Arabia while inaugurating the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council (SICC) on October 22.

The first meeting of the Council was held with the aim of consulting and coordinating on issues of mutual interest and enhancing cooperation between the two sides in various fields.

The meeting was chaired by Saudi Minister of Trade and Investment Dr. Majed bin Abdullah al-Qasbi and acting Iraqi Minister of Planning and Trade Dr. Suleiman al-Jamili. Both countries also signed deals on various political and economic cooperation.

The Council, which was approved by the Saudi cabinet in August 2017, aims to raise the level of strategic, investment and cultural relations between the two countries, and opening a new window of opportunity for Iraq to revive its economy. With the inauguration of the Council and other initiatives, Saudi Arabia aims to reduce the influence of Iran in Iraq.

According to a joint statement issued by the two countries following the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council meeting in Riyadh, the two sides stressed "the need to work together to reduce the obstacles and facilitate the entry of exports between the two countries".²

¹ "Joining hands to face challenges," *Saudi Gazette*, October 22, 2017
<http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/519945/SAUDI%20ARABIA?page=1>.

² "Iraq, Saudi Arabia agree on improving trade relations," *Daily Sabah*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2017/10/23/iraq-saudi-arabia-agree-on-improving-trade-relations>.

During the meeting, both Saudi Arabia and Iraq agreed to develop an association between the private sector in the two countries and help businessmen from both sides to identify trade and investment opportunities. Riyadh and Baghdad also agreed to open ports and develop roads in the border areas. They agreed to resume flights between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and open a Saudi Consulate in Iraq. Moreover, the Saudi side will aim to study the possibility of cooperation in the rehabilitation of the Jamwa-Samawa road. This is the ancient trading route between Mesopotamia and Saudi Arabia which runs through Samawah city in Iraq. Moreover, the completion of the operation of the road pilgrimage in Anbar province after twenty-seven years will also be surveyed. A study will also be conducted to assess the technical and economic feasibility of the project of Saudi-Iraqi electricity connection, in addition to the study of the implementation of customs outlets, which will supplement trade exchange between the two countries.³

At the end of the meeting the two sides agreed to hold the second meeting of the Council in Baghdad in the presence of ministers and senior officials of both countries.

Iraq and Saudi Arabia, estranged for decades after Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, have tried in recent years to settle their differences. The meeting marked the first time Saudi Arabia and Iraq formally declared their cooperation, which has its roots to a historic meeting in June 2017 when the Saudi and Iraqi leaders came together in Riyadh for the first time in 25 years. Saudi Arabia's regional foe Iran, and its influence in the region, especially on Iraq, were on top of the agenda in both meetings.

The inauguration of the SICC was not only about establishing a mechanism for strengthening the Saudi-Iraqi relationship, but also about how to provide Baghdad with an alternate counter balance given its tenuous relationship with Tehran. For Baghdad, the lure of Saudi investment was the biggest take away from the meeting.

This meeting coincided with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's Middle East, South Asia and Europe tour from October 20-26.

He arrived in Riyadh on October 20, 2017 to participate in meeting of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council and to discuss the crisis in Yemen with Saudi leaders. During his visit, he encouraged the two Arab countries to further improve bilateral ties in order to promote regional stability and challenge Iranian influence in the Middle East. At a press conference in Riyadh, Tillerson also called for the

³ Rami, "What are the joint projects between Iraq and Saudi Arabia after the establishment of the Coordinating Council," *Iraq's Economic Center*, October 23, 2017, <http://en.economiciraq.com/2017/10/23/what-are-the-joint-projects-between-iraq-and-saudi-arabia-after-the-establishment-of-the-coordinating-council/>.

disbanding of Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups in Iraq. He also emphasized that Saudi Arabia could help rebuild Iraqi cities destroyed in the fight against the Islamic State, and therefore reduce Baghdad's dependence on Iran.⁴

He then went on to Doha where he met Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. In a meeting with Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, he stated that he was not hopeful that Saudi Arabia was willing to enter into discussions to resolve the crisis. "We cannot force talks upon people who are not ready to talk"⁵ he said.

Tillerson also made an unannounced visit to Baghdad where he met with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Among other things, the two sides discussed curative measures to the current Kurdish fight with the central government and discussed accelerating post-Islamic State reconstruction projects for Iraq's liberated towns and cities.⁶

Given that the SICC summit was about the high incentives for Iraq's future, it was not surprising that no breakthrough in the Gulf Cooperation Council crisis was achieved during Tillerson's visit to Riyadh. It had already been made clear from US President Donald Trump's meeting with Qatari Emir Sheikh Al-Thani on the side-lines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York in September 2017, that Washington considers the Gulf crisis harmful to its regional agenda. It was also clear from Tillerson's meetings that the primary focus this time was to fortify the trilateral US-Saudi-Iraqi relationship as part of a strategy to reduce Tehran's regional design, with discussions on how to resolve the GCC crisis taking a back burner.

Although the concrete results were minimal, the symbolism of Iraqi prime minister making the trip to Saudi Arabia was significant. It shows that there is a definite shift toward the utilization of 'Arab identity,' rather than Sunni identity, to gain regional leverage over the Iranians.

⁴ Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks at the Saudi Arabia-Iraq Inaugural Coordination Council Meeting," *U.S. Department of State*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/10/274993.htm>

⁵ Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks With Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani," *U.S. Department of State*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/10/274999.htm>

⁶ Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks at the Office of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi," *U.S. Department of State*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/10/275015.htm>.