
IRAQI ELECTIONS TO TEST SAUDI RAPPROCHEMENT

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by Arwa Ibrahim

Saudi Arabia's courting of Iraq's Shia religious and political leaders over the past year has marked a clear shift in Riyadh's policies towards Baghdad. But this rapprochement can go in one of two directions, according to analysts.

Riyadh's efforts to engage Shia allies in Iraq could either defuse sectarianism across the country, or it could turn Iraq into another stage for Iranian-Saudi rivalries.

With politicians taking part in Iraq's parliamentary elections in May hoping to form diverse, cross-sectarian coalitions, the vote stands to test whether Riyadh's moves in Baghdad will gain enduring favour.

According to Fanar al-Hadad, a senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore: "The groundwork for success of Saudi influence over Iraq is likely because there has been a high-level buy-in [among political elites]. But many of Riyadh's eggs in Iraq are on hold until after the elections."

Although Haider al-Abadi, Iraq's prime minister, is probably set for another term - which would potentially allow for another four years of engagement with Saudi Arabia - it remains unlikely, however, that Riyadh will be able to displace Iran as the most influential foreign political actor in Iraq, analysts have said.

Cross-sectarianism

Unlike its sectarian approach towards Yemen and Lebanon, Saudi Arabia's more nuanced policies towards Iraq can potentially make gains for both countries in the long-term.

"Saudi policy in Iraq seems to be more nuanced and well thought out than it has been in Lebanon and Yemen," said Hadad.

"In the past, Saudi policy sought to undermine Iran's position in Iraq by seeking allies from among Iraq's oppositional spectrum, [which are] mainly Sunni.

"More recently, Riyadh has been trying to make inroads with Shia politicians and leaders from within the system, thereby fostering an acceptance of the post-2003 order."

Mamoon Alabbasi, a MENA-focused political analyst, said the same: "The Saudis came to the realisation that dealing with Iraq's Sunni figures alone is not enough. [They've felt the need] to engage with senior Shia politicians, as well."

As part of Saudi Arabia's efforts to engage with Shia religious leaders, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (also known as MBS) met Iraqi Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr in Riyadh in July last year.

After Sadr had criticised Iran's influence over Iraq's domestic politics, and further challenged Tehran's sway in Iraq when he called for the demobilisation of the Iraqi Shia militias - regarded as Iranian proxies - observers saw the visit as a message from Riyadh to Tehran, that it too can forge connections with Iraq's Shia.

In advance of the general elections scheduled for 12 May, Prime Minister Abadi announced in January that he would lead a cross-sectarian list.

Many influential Iraqi politicians have also tried to distance themselves from sectarian rhetoric in the run-up to the vote.

"Prominent Iraqi politicians, from the prime minister to influential cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to even Ammar al-Hakim, are seeking to present themselves as nationalist figures to appeal to cross-sectarian electorates in the upcoming elections," said Alabbasi.

With an Abadi-led electoral alliance expected to win enough seats for the current prime minister to continue leading the government, Saudi Arabia's newly founded approach is set to make further gains after the vote.

"If the new government doesn't have former members of Hashd al-Shaabi and has the support of Sadrists and Sunni lists, then it would certainly send reassuring signals to Saudi Arabia," said Alabbasi.

Rebuilding ties

Iraq had been estranged from its Sunni Arab neighbours since the 1991 Gulf war - triggered by former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait - and the 2003 US invasion, which saw Iraq's Shia majority rise to power and a strengthening of ties with Tehran and Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

While the first major event that signalled Riyadh's return to Iraq occurred in 2015, when it reopened its embassies in Baghdad and Erbil, the year 2017 witnessed fast-paced and marked progress in bilateral relations, as Iraq defeated the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group in July 2017 and instead focused its efforts on attracting investors to rebuild the country.

"The Saudi rapprochement came at the right time. Abadi was looking for international support in its war against ISIL and in the country's recovering bid after its victory," said Alabbasi.

"Abadi has also reiterated that Iraq wants good ties with all its neighbours and was not looking to take sides between Saudi Arabia and Iran."

In February, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir made the first visit to Iraq by a senior Saudi official in 27 years.

The visit was reciprocated by Abadi visiting Riyadh in June and Iraqi Interior Minister Qasim al-Araji visiting in mid-July to discuss security and intelligence cooperation.

More recently, Saudi Transport Minister Nabil al-Amoudi and Iraqi Transport Minister Kazim al-Hamam signed an air transport agreement last week in Riyadh, which will pave the way for a potential trade agreement along the Arar border crossing.

At the same time, Saudi companies, most recently the leading petrochemical company Saudi Basic Industries Corporation, have been opening offices in Baghdad and Basra to expand economic exchange between the two countries.

A friendly football game held a few months ago between Saudi Arabia and Iraq in Basra, the first between the two countries in decades, was attended by Saudi delegations and celebrated by large Iraqi crowds.

Saudi Arabia has since pledged \$1.5bn towards Iraq's reconstruction during a donors' conference in February and it was scheduled to reopen its consulate in the oil-rich city of Basra in March, but this was delayed for administrative reasons.

While bin Salman was expected to visit Iraq to open the consulates in Basra and Najaf, a Shia religious centre and home to top Shia religious leaders, recent protests in Baghdad against the visit have ultimately led to Saudi Arabia denying he has intentions to visit.

Commenting on the events, Adil al-Ghurari from Baghdad University said: "There are two positions towards Saudi involvement in Iraq: one feels a strong affinity towards its Arab neighbours, therefore wanting to move closer to Saudi Arabia, while the other sides with Iran."

But according to Hadad: "Refusal of Saudi involvement in Iraq is not mainstream although it represents pockets of popular sentiment which is sceptical of the Gulf kingdom."

Iranian supremacy

Initiatives to expand Saudi-Iraqi relations have been directly sponsored by the UN, with then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson attending a meeting to establish the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council in Riyadh in October.

The stakes of an Iraqi-Saudi rapprochement, which takes place in the context of the new US policy to form a united front that would counter Iran's rise in the Middle East, are therefore high.

"The fear is that if American-Saudi-Emirati push-back against Iran heats up and the nuclear deal is scrapped, it would be in Iran's interest to hit back via Iraq," said Hadad.

"If Iran's roadway to stability is jeopardised, Iraq's will be sabotaged as well."

According to Alabbasi: "The Saudis know that they can't have the same influence as Iran in post-2003 Iraq, so it would be inaccurate to assume that there is some sort of competition between Riyadh and Tehran.

"What the Saudis are hoping to see is an Iraq that is independent from Iran's orbit - a neutral Iraq."

So far, there has been a muted response from Iran towards Saudi Arabia's moves, but if Iran were to engage, the biggest loser will be Iraq, said analysts.

"If a competition ignites between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Iraq, it won't be in the Iraqi people's favour," Ghurari told Al Jazeera.

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