
IRAQI PRESIDENT SAYS IRAQ IS NO COUNTRY 'FOR SETTLING SCORES'

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Iraqi President Barham Salih warned against allowing Iraq to become a battlefield where rival regional and international players clash, saying that would undermine the security of all parties involved.

We do not want Iraq to become an arena for settling scores, Salih told Al Arab and The Arab Weekly in an exclusive interview on the sidelines of the Arab League Summit, March 31 in Tunis.

The (Iraqi) government also will not let it happen. There exists a serious national will to make Iraq a platform for convergence and encounter and a true meeting point for common interests in the region.

Salih said he saw the role of his post as a symbol of the unity of the country and the defender of its sovereignty. However, talking about Iraq's sovereignty is something and recognising the reality and the regional and international interventions in Iraq is something else.

For decades, Iraq has been the scene of violent conflict and war at the expense of its people. So, how does Salih see his role as guardian of national sovereignty in a country where regional and international actors are constantly racing to violate this sovereignty?

We want Iraq to be a meeting place for international and regional interests but in accordance with the interests and sovereignty of Iraq, said Salih. Our security, political and economic priorities require us not to subscribe to policies of following (political) axes or joining specific trenches. It is not in the interest of Iraq to take part in any conflict or confrontation against its neighbours.

Salih said that, despite US-Iranian tensions, both Washington and Tehran understand that Iraq's instability would not be in their favour. Even the rival international and regional parties recognise, to varying degrees, the importance of Iraq's stability and success, Salih added.

Iraq, he continued, highly appreciates the role and support of the United States for the Iraqi government in fighting terrorism and defeating the Islamic State (ISIS).

It is in our interest to manage and strengthen our relations with [the United States] in accordance with the interests of our people and our country, in a way that preserves Iraq's sovereignty and independence and allows the Iraqi government to face the challenges it has.

The Iraqi president said he sees dealing with Iran from the point of view of an unavoidable geographical reality. Iran is our neighbour. We have cultural and social ties with it, as well as common borders of about 1,400km, which require a common set of security, economic and

political interests between the two countries, he said.

Nevertheless, Iraq also has Arab neighbours. During the past few years, the Arabs have made clear moves towards Iraq, following decades of a cold spell. The Arab League Summit was an important milestone towards convergence. Arab leaders praised Iraq for defeating ISIS, which was a threat to the region with no exceptions.

The continuation of Arab support and understanding of the circumstances of Iraq is important in the next phase of uprooting ISIS. Political and security stability in Iraq is crucial to the return of displaced people and to the reconstruction of liberated areas and Arab, regional and international support is important to achieving those goals, said Salih.

Each time the Arab states and governments take a step towards Iraq, Iraq will match it with several steps and fast.

Iraq has taken constructive steps towards its Arab environment, Salih said. Most recently, it played a major role in holding the tripartite summit with Egypt and Jordan and has emphasised the need to consolidate joint Arab economic integration in light of the sensitive conditions in the region.

In addition, the Jordanian monarch and the Palestinian president have visited Iraq and have had important discussions that will open a new phase towards more constructive Arab prospects.

Salih said: There are economic exchanges and large projects with strategic dimensions between Iraq and the Arab Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Iraq has insisted in more than one international or local forum, that its gates are widely open to Arab cooperation and roles in reconstructing Iraq and investing in it. This attitude comes from Iraq's pride in its Arab and Islamic depth.

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