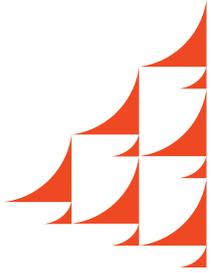


The Arab Gulf States  
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The Power of Positive Diplomacy:  
Saudi Outreach in Iraq since 2014

Hussein Ibish



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April 19, 2018

## The Power of Positive Diplomacy: Saudi Outreach in Iraq since 2014

Hussein Ibish

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## Executive Summary

One of the most important and least understood aspects of Saudi Arabia's evolving proactive foreign and regional policy is its campaign of diplomatic and political outreach in Iraq. After almost a century of relations marked largely by rivalry and occasional enmity, Saudi Arabia felt increasingly frozen out of Iraq's political dynamics as the country began to emerge from the U.S. occupation. Particularly during the second term of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, Riyadh effectively walked away from an Iraqi government that appeared irredeemably under Iranian sway. But even in this period, Saudi Arabia continued efforts to expand relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in the north and certain Iraqi Sunni Arab constituencies.

Starting in 2014, Saudi Arabia initiated a project to regain a measure of influence in Iraqi politics and policy. Along with the restoration of diplomatic, trade, and other relations that had been frozen for decades, Riyadh's Iraq initiative has involved building ties with numerous Iraqi Shia Arab leaders, including Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and populist leader Muqtada al-Sadr, both of whom traveled to Saudi Arabia in 2017.

Unlike some of its other recent foreign policy initiatives, Saudi Arabia's outreach to Iraq has been centered almost entirely on incentives and positive inducements. Along with aid, trade, and other standard forms of outreach, Saudis have emphasized that almost all Iraqi constituencies stand to benefit from a more independent national policy that restores Iraq's standing in the Arab world and gains a measure of distance from Iran. Riyadh seems to have met with a considerable degree of success in rebuilding ties to Iraq. The May parliamentary elections in Iraq will be the next major development shaping this outreach. But, whatever happens, it is likely that Saudi Arabia will continue to pursue engagement and stronger relations with this crucial neighbor to the north.

## Introduction: Saudi Outreach to Iraq

Since geography constitutes an immutable first principle in international relations, it was inevitable that Iraq and Saudi Arabia would be central to each other's strategic calculations. Along with Iran, they constitute the three geographically and demographically significant Gulf countries. The vast majority of Iraq's southern border is adjacent to most of Saudi Arabia's northern frontiers. From the outset of their relationship, territorial disputes were a constant feature of Iraqi-Saudi dealings, and even after the "neutral zone" was divided and borders formally demarcated in 1981, disputes over land, resources, and authority have persisted. Saudi Arabia and Iraq have variously been allies, enemies, and, for much of their modern history, rivals for power and influence in the Gulf region. This rivalry dates back to the familial political competition between the Saud and Hashemite clans when the modern forms of both states took shape; it persisted, in one form or another, until at least the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, six Gulf Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia, founded the Gulf Cooperation Council as a strategic response to the emergence of the new Islamic Republic, which cast itself as a vanguard for Islamist rebellions around the Muslim world. However, while the GCC was explicitly designed to protect the Gulf Arab monarchies from this

new revolutionary Shia power, and was therefore primarily an anti-Iranian, and in some ways even anti-Persian, alliance, Iraq was pointedly not included in the council. Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime in Iraq was both Arab and anti-theocratic, but it was itself revolutionary (pseudo-leftist and pro-Soviet), aggressively republican, and potentially expansionist. Therefore, as the GCC monarchies banded together, Iraq was an important, although at least initially, secondary security concern. It's therefore possible that something like the GCC might have been formed without the Iranian Revolution. But it's difficult to imagine Iraq's inclusion or the development of an analogous entity incorporating both Iraq and the GCC members.

Despite its ideological unwholesomeness from the point of view of the Gulf monarchies, Iraq was seen throughout the 1980s as a crucial bulwark against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, strongly supported and bankrolled the Iraqi side of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. However, when Iraq emerged from the war highly militarized, battle-hardened, and evidently rapacious, relations began to rapidly deteriorate. Long-standing Gulf Arab apprehensions about Iraqi ambitions were fully vindicated by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and subsequent efforts by Baghdad to annex the State of Kuwait

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*Long-standing Gulf Arab apprehensions about Iraqi ambitions were fully vindicated by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and subsequent efforts by Baghdad to annex the State of Kuwait as the "19th governorate of Iraq."*

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as the "19th governorate of Iraq." The subsequent U.S.-led war and international sanctions regime and no-fly zones effectively defanged Iraq as a direct and immediate threat to the Gulf Arab monarchies. However, even the greatly weakened Baathist Iraqi state remained an indispensable military and political barrier between Iran and the GCC countries.

The 2003 U.S. invasion put Iraq, once again, dramatically into strategic play. This paper examines Saudi Arabia's diplomatic and foreign policy response to the emergence of a new, post-Saddam Iraq that, for most of the past 15 years, has mainly operated under varying degrees of competing U.S. and Iranian influences. It traces these efforts from the early, and largely unsuccessful, attempts at Saudi outreach to the new Iraq following the invasion, a subsequent period of relative disengagement by Riyadh, and the more recent major diplomatic and political initiative to restore Saudi-Iraqi relations and regain a political foothold for Riyadh in Iraq, at least to some extent at the expense of Tehran.

Lacking viable forms of coercive leverage, in its new Iraqi outreach, Saudi Arabia has relied almost entirely on positive reinforcement, incentives, and inducements, particularly with regard to Iraqi Shia political leaders. In this sense, rapprochement with Iraq represents one of several important and contrasting experiments in Saudi Arabia's newly assertive and increasingly independent regional policy. This Iraq policy might present an instructive model for future Saudi diplomatic and political engagement with other complex and divided societies – such as those of Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon – that cannot simply or easily be controlled by either internal or external actors. This paper traces the origins, development, and trajectory of that policy, and seeks to explain how and why Saudi Arabia has re-engaged so forcefully in Iraq in recent years and what Riyadh hopes to achieve.

## Historical Background: 1920-2003

Saudi-Iraqi relations were initially developed against a complex backdrop of national, religious, and familial rivalry. In 1921, the founder of the modern Saudi state, Abdulaziz al-Saud, or Ibn Saud, overcame his rivals and founded the Sultanate of Nejd against a backdrop of political and personal rivalry with the Kingdom of Hejaz and its Hashemite rulers and the 1918-19 territorial conflict over al-Khurma oasis.<sup>1</sup> In 1925, Abdulaziz conquered Hejaz, expelled its Hashemite ruler, Hussein bin Ali, and unified the territories, setting the stage for the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1930.

However, the sons of Hussein bin Ali came to power in the Emirate of Transjordan and what became the Kingdom of Iraq. In 1920, the League of Nations established Iraq as a British-controlled mandate and quickly installed one of Hussein bin Ali's sons, Faisal I, as king. Faisal had established the first, though short-lived, pan-Arab state based in Damascus in 1920. But he was quickly deposed by Syria's French colonial authorities and was instead established as the Iraqi monarch by Britain in 1921.<sup>2</sup> The familial and political rivalry that began in the Arabian Peninsula was, therefore, transferred onto relations between the emerging Saudi kingdom and Iraq, which was made nominally independent by Britain in 1932.<sup>3</sup>

Competing claims over history and legitimacy were compounded by territorial disputes and an ongoing Hashemite claim of authority in and over Hejaz. The basic boundaries of Iraq and Saudi Arabia, as well as Kuwait, were essentially delineated by the British-imposed Uqair Protocol of 1922, which also created "neutral zones" between Saudi Arabia and both Iraq and Kuwait.<sup>4</sup> The Saudi-Iraqi neutral zone long remained a source of disputes.<sup>5</sup> Competition over territorial claims and political legitimacy were effectively resolved by a British-brokered agreement in 1930 whereby the emerging Saudi and Iraqi states recognized each other. This was reinforced by a 1936 agreement between Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. In 1957, King Faisal II of Iraq officially renounced any claims over Hejaz in an agreement with King Saud bin Abdulaziz.<sup>6</sup>

However, relations were additionally strained by Iraq's participation, beginning in 1955, in the Central Treaty Organization, or "Baghdad Pact," which Saudi Arabia regarded as an effort to consolidate British hegemony in the Gulf region. But as the 1950s wore on, Saudi anxieties

<sup>1</sup> Alexei Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 1998), 502-03.

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Maisel and John A. Shoup, *Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab States Today: An Encyclopedia of Life in the Arab States: K-Z* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009), 409.

<sup>3</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph McMillan, "[Saudi Arabia and Iraq: Oil, Religion, and an Enduring Rivalry](#)," *United States Institute of Peace*, January 1, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> René Rieger, "[The Foreign Policy of the Arab Gulf Monarchies from 1971 to 1990](#)," (PhD dissertation, University of Exeter, June 3, 2013), 405.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Brew, "Our Most Dependable Allies: Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Eisenhower Doctrine, 1956-1958," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2015), 100.

began to focus on the threats of pan-Arab nationalism, particularly as influenced by Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser, and the rise of socialist or communist movements, particularly of a pro-Soviet variety, in the Arab world. These two phenomena were often conflated from a Saudi perspective. The July 14, 1958 coup in Baghdad, which brought the Baath party to power, seemed a perfect example of this double threat, given the pan-Arab, Marxist, and pro-Soviet orientation of the new Iraqi regime.

Riyadh's concerns about the Baathist-oriented regime in Baghdad were confirmed when Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim asserted Iraqi sovereignty over Kuwait, as Kuwait was gaining independence from Britain in 1961, and threatened to seize the territory. Saudi Arabia was a key organizer of opposition to Iraq's claims in the Arab League and deployed 1,200 Saudi troops to Kuwait as British forces drew down.<sup>7</sup> Through the 1970s, Kuwait remained a major source of tension between Baghdad and Riyadh, most notably when Iraqi troops attacked Samita, a border area in northeastern Kuwait. Ideological tensions also persisted, with Iraqi support for revolutionary, Marxist, and republican opposition groups throughout the Gulf and in Yemen, which Saudi Arabia regarded as a direct challenge to its regional interests and even a threat to its domestic political stability.

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*In 1981, Saudi Arabia and Iraq demarcated their border at last and agreed to share oil revenue from the neutral zone.*

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The Islamic Revolution in Iran at the end of the decade, however, prodded Baghdad and Riyadh closer together. In 1981, Saudi Arabia and Iraq demarcated their border at last and agreed to share oil revenue from the neutral zone. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait emerged as the principal financial backers of Iraq's eight-year war against Iran and provided a great deal of other support for Baghdad during the conflict. However, under Saudi leadership, the other six Gulf Arab states' primary response to Iran's revolution was the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council, from which Iraq was pointedly excluded. As Phebe Marr notes, this institutionalized and formalized a division between Iraq and the Gulf Arab monarchies,<sup>8</sup> reflecting not merely a degree of cultural, historical, and familial distance but also a measure of anxiety about Iraq's size, power, and intentions.

Those anxieties were fully vindicated by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, which led to a prolonged period of outright enmity and de facto warfare between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The two countries severed virtually all diplomatic and trade relations and closed their borders to each other, while Saudi Arabia served as the forward base for the U.S.-led coalition that ousted Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991. For the remainder of the Saddam Hussein era, Saudi-Iraqi relations were marked by suspicion and hostility.

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<sup>7</sup> Mike D. Goodwin, "[The Iraq-Kuwait Crisis of 1961: A Lesson in Interregional Politics and Economics](#)," (master's thesis, University of Washington, June 13, 1991), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 192.

## The U.S. Invasion and Its Immediate Aftermath: 2003-06

Despite deep and ongoing hostility toward the regime of Saddam Hussein, Saudi Arabia was not overtly supportive of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. While the prospect of regime change in Baghdad in and of itself did not cause anxiety in Riyadh, concerns about the potential fallout of the U.S. invasion – above all the likelihood that pro-Iranian forces could become ascendant in a post-Saddam Iraq – resulted in a formal position of neutrality on the part of Saudi officials before the invasion. Saudis were also concerned that another U.S. attack against an Arab country could feed political extremism and the radical sentiments that had given rise to the September 11 attacks against the United States. Such terrorism was increasingly viewed not only as a threat to the West, but also as a threat to Western allies in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia at the top of the list of al-Qaeda's targets. Therefore, Riyadh was extremely cautious about the prospect of an invasion of Iraq and said it would not join any military effort without prior U.N. approval, which was considered unlikely and which Washington failed to secure despite repeated attempts. Saudi officials said they feared that without such authorization the invasion would be viewed by many Arabs as “a war of aggression rather than a war for the implementation of the United Nations resolutions.”<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, to preserve close ties, especially regarding military cooperation, with the United States, and to keep open lines of access and communication into Iraq after the invasion, Saudi Arabia participated much more in facilitating the invasion than was disclosed at the time. While Riyadh and Washington had announced during the buildup to the invasion that Saudi Arabia approved an expanded U.S. military presence in the country, it was subsequently revealed that the Saudi role was essential to the successful mission.<sup>10</sup> In 2004, U.S. officials told the Associated Press that the “air campaign against Iraq was essentially managed from inside Saudi borders, where military commanders operated an air command center and launched refueling tankers, F-16 fighter jets, and sophisticated intelligence gathering flights.”<sup>11</sup> And, although coalition ground forces were largely deployed from Kuwait, U.S. special forces were dispatched into Iraq from Saudi Arabia, particularly after Turkey refused permission for the U.S. military to stage attacks against Iraq from its soil.<sup>12</sup> This level of Saudi cooperation was kept quiet for almost a year because of concerns about the political unpopularity of the invasion in Saudi Arabia, and efforts by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda to exploit the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia as a rationalization for terrorism and efforts to overthrow the Saudi monarchy. Such concerns led to the relocation, shortly after the start of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, of the U.S. Combat Air Operations Center for the Middle East from Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Saudis Warn US over Iraq War,” *BBC*, February 17, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Karen DeYoung, “U.S. and Saudis Agree on Cooperation,” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> John Solomon, “Saudi Aid to US in Iraq War Disclosed,” *Associated Press*, April 25, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> John Solomon, “Saudi Aid to US in Iraq War Disclosed,” *Associated Press*, April 25, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Gordon and Eric Schmit, “Aftereffects: Bases: U.S. Will Move Air Operations to Qatar Base,” *The New York Times*, April 28, 2003.

In the event, Riyadh discovered that neither its largely covert role in the invasion nor its strong partnership with the United States allowed it to play a major, let alone decisive, role in post-occupation stabilization and political dynamics in Iraq. To the contrary, Saudi Arabia watched with increasing concern as U.S. authorities pursued a series of policies that appeared to play directly into the hands of pro-Iranian Shia groups in Iraq. Post-occupation politics were given an overtly sectarian and ethnic patina, with religious or ethnic identifications generally applied to the Iraqi participants in U.S. institution-building projects. This may have been designed by U.S. officials to demonstrate inclusivity, but many Saudis and other Arabs feared that the institutionalization of sectarian consciousness in the new Iraq would deepen national divisions and come at the expense of the Sunni Arab community, and not just former regime figures. Indeed, the occupation instituted a campaign of “de-Baathification” that seemed to exclude many Iraqis of Sunni Arab background, further advantaging Iran’s clients and weakening some natural allies of Saudi Arabia that were not enthusiastic supporters of Saddam’s regime.<sup>14</sup> The dissolution of the Iraqi military was, perhaps, the most striking example of such policies, but cumulatively they weakened Riyadh’s hand, strengthened that of Tehran<sup>15</sup> and encouraged the development of extremist Sunni insurgent groups.<sup>16</sup>

Saudi Arabia found itself effectively frozen out of post-invasion Iraqi politics, watching largely from the sidelines as its allies continuously lost ground to other forces, particularly sectarian Shia groups aligned with Iran. In July 2004, Iraq’s interim president, Ghazi al-Yawar, was branded “Saudi Arabia’s man in Iraq,” on the grounds that he had deep personal and family ties to the country, was a Saudi citizen, and had been educated in Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup> The problem, of course, was that, whatever his inclinations might have been, he had no authority. Even the interim prime minister, Ayad Allawi, had limited governing powers. And, in fact, a political system was being hashed out that left Yawar and similar actors in Iraq with very little room to maneuver.

Riyadh did attempt outreach to Iraq through social and humanitarian projects such as a field hospital to care for the wounded in the conflict. And it tried to build connections to at least one Iraqi Shia party at this time, Fadhila, but little came of the effort.<sup>18</sup> The Sunni insurgency greatly expanded in size and scope, and began to increasingly dominate the Iraqi national agenda. Sunni Arabs, like other groups, began to be defined in terms of where they fit regarding the insurgency, and with regard to other sectarian and ethnic groups. Along with de-Baathification and several other developments, the scope and centrality of the insurgency increasingly dominated this period of Iraqi politics and greatly narrowed the space in which Saudi influence could operate in the country.

The relationship of Saudi Arabia to the insurgency is hotly debated. Iran, some Iraqi Shia groups, and others have accused Saudi Arabia and its allies of supporting insurgent groups or other extremists in Iraq, although there appears to be no evidence to support these claims.

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<sup>14</sup> Coalitional Provisional Authority, Order Number 1, “[De-Ba’athification of Iraqi Society](#),” May 16, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Cherish M. Zinn, “[Consequences of Iraqi De-Baathification](#),” *Cornell International Affairs Review* 9, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Thompson, “[How Disbanding the Iraqi Army Fueled ISIS](#),” *Time*, May 29, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Maggie Mitchell Salem, “Saudi Arabia’s Man in Baghdad,” *Salon*, September 25, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Neil Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 134.

Others have maintained that private Saudi and other Gulf Arab support went to a range of extremist Arab Sunni groups in Iraq, and while that has been verified, the scale of such support remains unclear.<sup>19</sup>

To be sure, Saudis were present among the foreign fighters drawn to Iraq in support of groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni Muslim violent radicals. But the foreign presence in the Iraqi insurgency was never overwhelming, and, in fact, as Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman argued in late 2005, the insurgency was “largely homegrown,” with at least 90 percent of the fighters Iraqi.<sup>20</sup> They concluded that there were around 350 Saudis within the insurgency, comprising approximately 12 percent of the foreign fighters and 1.2 percent of the total insurgency of around 30,000.<sup>21</sup> However, in 2007, other reports indicated that 45 percent of the foreign Sunni militants in Iraq were Saudi.<sup>22</sup>

Riyadh did not hide its alarm about the drift of Iraqi politics following the invasion. In September 2005, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister, Prince Saud al-

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Faisal said he had been warning the administration of President George W. Bush that “all the dynamics are pulling the country apart.”<sup>23</sup> He specified that one of the most dangerous policies from a Saudi point of view was the new system stigmatizing “every Sunni as a Baathist criminal,” and said that Iran was flooding the country with money and weapons. Saudi Arabia never abandoned efforts at outreach toward Iraqis, including some surprising gestures such as a January 2006 meeting between King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz and the firebrand Iraqi Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, who was highly critical of both the U.S. role and, at that time, much of the Sunni Arab leadership in the country.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, in October 2006 the Saudis convened a meeting in Mecca between Sunni and Shia Iraqi religious leaders to try to promote an end to sectarian violence, but the effort was met with considerable skepticism and did not achieve any apparent results.<sup>25</sup>

## Riyadh Walks Away: 2007-14

On the whole, Saudi Arabia’s primary reaction to the deteriorating situation in Iraq was one of alarm, and in October 2006 it began to plan a “550-mile high-tech fence” to seal the border and stave off infiltration by militants.<sup>26</sup> Planning went forward slowly, but was given a renewed

<sup>19</sup> Tucker Reals, “[Saudi Citizens Funding Iraq Insurgents](#),” *CBS News*, December 8, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Nawaf Obaid and Anthony Cordesman, “[Saudi Militants in Iraq: Assessment and Kingdom’s Response](#),” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 19, 2005, 6.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Ned Parker, “[Iraq Insurgency Said to Include Many Saudis](#),” *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Joel Brinkley, “[Saudi Minister Warns U.S. Iraq May Face Disintegration](#),” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> “[Saudi King Meets with Iraqi Shiite Leader Muqtada Al-Sadr](#),” Middle East Media Research Institute, January 11, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> “[Iraq’s Shiite, Sunni Religious Figures Forbid Shiite-Sunni Bloodletting in Mecca Meeting](#),” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, October 21, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Harry De Quetteville, “[Saudis Build 550-mile Fence to Shut out Iraq](#),” *The Telegraph*, October 1, 2006.

impetus<sup>27</sup> following the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in 2014.<sup>28</sup> After he took office in May 2006, Saudi Arabia increasingly blamed Iraq's prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, for the worst of the country's problems, including in meetings with U.S. officials. This culminated with King Abdullah refusing to meet Maliki at a key regional summit in April 2007.<sup>29</sup> Riyadh argued that Maliki was excessively tied to Iran and was promoting sectarian and discriminatory policies at the expense of Iraqi Sunni communities and regional stability. The Americans countered with their own complaints about Saudi Arabia's role, and the number of Saudi foreign fighters in Iraq, while conceding that the Saudi government did not promote such behavior.<sup>30</sup> According to Neil Partrick, "personal animus between Al-Maliki and King Abdullah played a large part in the poor state of bilateral relations from 2005-14."<sup>31</sup>

Riyadh was particularly concerned that Maliki's policies were undermining and squandering the gains made by the 2007 U.S. military "surge" against Al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Saudi Arabia was politically supportive of the surge and the effort to create an "awakening" among Sunni Arabs in areas with a large presence of terrorist or extremist groups like al-Qaeda.<sup>33</sup> The Saudis, and several former U.S. officials, maintain that Maliki broke both his own and U.S. pledges to Iraqi Sunni communities and tribal leaders and constituencies that had been crucial to the success of the surge, including greater power sharing and a more open and inclusive political system.<sup>34</sup> Instead, he largely grabbed power for himself and his immediate political supporters.<sup>35</sup>

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After several years of relative disengagement, Saudi Arabia cautiously backed the secular Iraqi nationalist political leader and former Prime Minister Allawi, who met with King Abdullah in the weeks leading up to the March 7, 2010 elections.<sup>36</sup> In the vote, Allawi's Iraqiya coalition – which combined secular Shia leaders such as himself with other nationalists, including many Sunni Arabs who eschewed sectarianism – emerged with the largest number of seats in Parliament, two more than Maliki's State of Law grouping.<sup>37</sup> But Maliki convinced Iraq's chief justice, Medhat al-Mahmoud, to allow him to form a government on the grounds that he could put together the largest coalition in Parliament despite not having the largest electoral bloc. Using

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Spencer, "[Saudi Arabia Is Building A 600-Mile 'Great Wall' To Shield Itself From ISIS](#)," *Business Insider*, January 14, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Damien Gayle, "[The Great Wall of Saudi Arabia: Kingdom Plans to Build 600-Mile Barrier from Jordan to Kuwait in Response to the Threat of an Invasion by ISIS](#)," *Daily Mail Online*, January 16, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Robin Wright, "[Saudi King Declines to Receive Iraqi Leader](#)," *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Helene Cooper, "[Saudis' Role in Iraq Frustrates U.S. Officials](#)," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Neil Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 137.

<sup>32</sup> Simon Steven, "[The Price of the Surge](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, June 2, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Neil Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), s139.

<sup>34</sup> Ali Khedery, "[Why We Stuck with Maliki – and Lost Iraq](#)," *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Emma Sky, "[How Obama Abandoned Democracy in Iraq](#)," *Politico Magazine*, April 7, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> "[Iraqi Former PM Allawi Meets Saudi King Ahead of Polls](#)," *Reuters*, February 20, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> "[Allawi's Coalition Wins Most Seats in Iraq Vote](#)," *CNN*, March 26, 2010.

this advantage and with massive backing from Iran, Maliki built a substantial postelection Shia coalition and, ultimately, won Washington's grudging but crucial support, forming another government despite the election results.<sup>38</sup>

As the consequences of the election fiasco unfolded, the Saudis "more or less 'gave up' any serious attempt to shape Iraq's domestic direction."<sup>39</sup> The second Maliki administration from 2010-14 was, from Riyadh's perspective, arguably even worse for Iraq than the first. During this period, ISIL emerged in Syria in the context of the raging civil war in that country, though in many ways drawn from the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq crushed during the U.S. surge and awakening of Iraqi Sunni communities against the extremists.

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The growing strains with Saudi Arabia and its allies were reflected in low-level Gulf Arab representation at the April 2011 Arab League summit in Baghdad.<sup>40</sup> However, despite tensions with Maliki, Saudi Arabia kept lines open to other constituencies, particularly Kurdish leaders. These included Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani, who visited Riyadh in April 2010 and met with King Abdullah,<sup>41</sup> and the other crucial Kurdish leader, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani.<sup>42</sup> And, in March 2012 Riyadh appointed the first Saudi ambassador to Iraq since the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, although on a nonresident basis.<sup>43</sup>

Strains with the Iraqi Sunni community, and indirectly with Saudi Arabia, were further exacerbated when Maliki accused Iraq's most prominent Sunni politician, Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, of terrorism and murder.<sup>44</sup> In December 2011, one day after the last U.S. combat troops were withdrawn from Iraq, Hashimi's home in the Green Zone was surrounded by government troops and an arrest warrant was issued for him. He fled to the KRG capital of Erbil and Kurdish leaders refused to extradite him back to Baghdad.<sup>45</sup> However, he eventually relocated to Ankara, where he remains.<sup>46</sup> In April 2012, he met with officials in Saudi Arabia, although he is primarily aligned with Turkey rather than Saudi Arabia.<sup>47</sup> Hashimi's exclusion from Iraqi politics exacerbated the disenfranchisement of Iraqi Sunnis during this period and the sense that not only a sectarian Shia order was being created in Iraq, but one that was increasingly under the direct control of Iran.

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Chulov and Spencer Ackerman, "[How Nouri Al-Maliki Fell Out of Favour with the US](#)," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Neil Partrick, *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2016), 140.

<sup>40</sup> "[Poor Turnout for Arab League Summit in Baghdad](#)," *The Times of Israel*, March 29, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> "[President Barzani Makes Official Visit to Saudi Arabia and Lebanon](#)," Kurdistan Regional Government, April 16, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Ahmed Hussein, "[Talabani Arrives in Saudi Arabia](#)," *Iraqi News*, April 11, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> "[Iraq Accepts First Saudi Envoy since 1990](#)," *AFP*, March 28, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Jack Healy, "[Arrest Order for Sunni Leader in Iraq Opens New Rift](#)," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> "[Iraq Vice President Denies Charges of Running Death Squads](#)," *Fox News*, December 21, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> "[Turkey Says Will Not Hand over Fugitive Iraqi VP Hashemi](#)," *Reuters*, September 11, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Mohammed Jamjoom, "[Fugitive Iraqi Vice President in Saudi Arabia](#)," *CNN*, April 4, 2012.

Maliki's position on Iraq's relationship with Saudi Arabia fluctuated. In November 2013, he lashed out at Riyadh, saying that Saudi Arabia had "chosen not to be a friend of Iraq."<sup>48</sup> But he also said he was willing to travel to Saudi Arabia to resolve differences between the two countries.<sup>49</sup> By March 2014, he resumed accusations against Saudi Arabia, as well as Qatar, of funding Sunni insurgents in Anbar Governorate, implying that they were backing ISIL forces in that area and saying "I accuse them of openly hosting leaders of al Qaeda and Takfiris." In April 2014, he again accused Saudi Arabia of "interference" in Iraq, in particular supporting violent extremists in Anbar Governorate, and, to the great annoyance of Saudi Arabia and its allies, expressed strong support for the government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.<sup>50</sup> Saudi Arabia hotly denied the accusations, calling them "false allegations" and a "malicious falsehood."<sup>51</sup>

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*Strains with the Iraqi Sunni community, and indirectly with Saudi Arabia, were further exacerbated when Maliki accused Iraq's most prominent Sunni politician, Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, of terrorism and murder.*

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As ISIL gained ground in Syria in the later months of 2013, and especially after it re-entered Iraq in 2014 capturing Falluja in January and Mosul in June, the broadest costs of Maliki's maladministration and sectarian policies became evident. As his second term was winding down, Maliki presided over the creation of the quasi-official and often sectarian Shia militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.<sup>52</sup> Maliki already had a long history of backing sectarian Shia militia groups like the Badr Organization and Kataib Hizballah. The prime minister and his allies then moved to bestow government support on emerging PMF factions, and as justification cited a fatwa by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani calling for the creation of grassroots militias to combat ISIL and other extremists. Under this rubric, Maliki and his allies championed a set of quasi-official militias, many of them viciously sectarian. With thousands of fighters that operate partly with the support, but almost entirely free from the control, of the Iraqi state, these militias in many cases are answerable only to their own leaders or various Shia, usually pro-Iranian, political figures.

Riyadh had every reason to feel vindicated regarding its warnings, particularly to Washington, about the impact of a second Maliki term. But he had also managed to alienate many Iraqi Sunni leaders and lost at least a degree of confidence in Tehran. With politics in Iraq beginning to shift, Riyadh began to carefully lay the groundwork for a political and diplomatic re-engagement with Iraqis across the board. One of the first gestures was a pledge by King Abdullah for \$500 million in humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people regardless of their religious, sectarian, or ethnic affiliation.<sup>53</sup> But Saudi Arabia also bluntly warned Iran not to intervene

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<sup>48</sup> "Iraqi PM Criticizes Saudis," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, November 8, 2013.

<sup>49</sup> "Maliki Ready to Visit Saudi Arabia to End Differences, Statement," *Iraq TradeLink News Agency*, November 7, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> "Iraqi PM Nouri Maliki Accuses Saudis of 'Interference,'" *BBC News*, April 25, 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Ian Black, "Saudi Arabia Rejects Iraqi Accusations of Isis Support," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Renad Mansour and Jabar A. Faleh, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 28, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> "Saudi Arabia Pledges \$500 Million to Iraq," *Middle East Eye*, July 1, 2014.

directly in Iraq, suggesting that it was no longer willing to regard Iraq in general as “lost” to Tehran or continue an attitude of relative detachment.<sup>54</sup> There was now every reason and the opportunity to re-engage.

## Re-engaging with Iraq: September 2014-Present

Under heavy pressure from many Iraqi constituencies, and having lost the support of the United States and at least some degree of backing in Tehran, Maliki resigned in September 2014. Parliament then selected another, but very different, leader of the same Dawa Party, Haider al-Abadi, to take over as prime minister. Along with many other international leaders, Saudi King Abdullah publicly expressed congratulations to Abadi, indicating an interest in developing a new relationship with him and Iraq.<sup>55</sup> A few weeks later, Iraqi President Fuad Masum arrived in Riyadh for the first senior-level negotiations between the two countries in many years.<sup>56</sup> In December 2014, Saudi Arabia began the process of rebuilding its diplomatic presence in Iraq, and in June 2015 appointed Thamer al-Sabhan as its first resident ambassador to Iraq in a quarter of a century.<sup>57</sup> In September, Iraq reciprocated, sending its own ambassador to Riyadh.

The execution of Shia Saudi cleric Nimr-al-Nimr and the conflict in Yemen remained stumbling blocks between Saudi Arabia and Iraqi Shia leaders like Abadi and Sadr toward the end of 2015 and the early months of 2016.<sup>58</sup> And in the first half of 2016, comments by Sabhan, including blunt criticism of Iran’s role in Iraq and calls to disband PMF groups, repeatedly angered some Iraqi leaders.<sup>59</sup> There were even accusations that Iran had plotted to assassinate Sabhan.<sup>60</sup> Iraq asked Riyadh to replace him and in May 2017 he was replaced by Abdulaziz al-Shammari.<sup>61</sup> Saudi Arabia also continued to cultivate closer ties to the KRG and opened a consulate in Erbil in February 2016.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the tensions, there were ample reasons for both sides to want to continue to explore better relations. The cracks in the once-solid wall of unified and pro-Iranian Shia national leadership in Iraq ran too deep for Riyadh to pass up the opportunity to regain a foothold in Iraqi politics and undermine Iran’s control of the country. And closer ties to Saudi Arabia represented an opportunity for Shia politicians to reach out to Sunni and other Iraqi constituencies, broaden their base of support, and gain a competitive advantage against each other. For Iraqis in general, better ties with Saudi Arabia offered a chance to pursue their own national interests, by balancing regional rivals against each other rather than being entirely dominated by one or the other. The mutual benefits had become obvious, particularly since

<sup>54</sup> [“Saudis Give Apparent Warning to Iran: Don’t Meddle in Iraq,”](#) *Reuters*, June 18, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> [“Glad to Be Rid of Maliki, Saudi Arabia Congratulates New Iraq PM,”](#) *Reuters*, August 12, 2014.

<sup>56</sup> [“Saudi, Iraqi Leaders Hold Landmark Talks,”](#) *Al Arabiya*, November 11, 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Hamza Mustafa, [“Saudi Arabia Appoints First Ambassador to Iraq in 25 Years,”](#) *Asharq Al-Awsat*, June 3, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> [“Execution of Shia Cleric Sparks International Outrage – as It Happened,”](#) *The Guardian*, January 2, 2016.

<sup>59</sup> E. Ezrahi, [“Saudi-Iraqi Tensions Rise After Saudi Ambassador Criticizes Iranian Involvement In Iraq,”](#) *Middle East Research Institute*, October 2, 2016.

<sup>60</sup> [“Iran Conspiracy to Kill Saudi Envoy to Iraq Uncovered,”](#) *Arab News*, August 21, 2016

<sup>61</sup> [“Saudi Arabia Appoints New Ambassador to Iraq,”](#) *Rudaw.net*, November 5, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> [“Saudi Arabia Opens Erbil Consulate,”](#) *Rudaw.net*, February 23, 2016.

Iraqi Shias had become so entrenched in power, at least in much of the country, including Baghdad, that they could contemplate moving away from Tehran, at least to some extent, and offsetting Iranian leverage with that of Saudi Arabia in order to pursue their own political and national interests without risking any return to Sunni domination.

The overtures continued to develop until the significant breakthrough of a visit to Baghdad by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir in February 2017, the first trip of its kind since 1990.<sup>63</sup> To many people around the world, this seemed a sudden and surprising development, but it reflected years of cautious and careful effort on both sides. This was followed up in March by a meeting between Jubeir and Abadi on the sidelines of a summit of foreign ministers of the international coalition against ISIL and a statement by Saudi Arabia congratulating Iraq on its ongoing victories against ISIL and pledging solidarity until all Iraqi territory was liberated.<sup>64</sup> Later that month, Saudi and Iraqi diplomats meeting in Riyadh promised to stop exchanging accusations and establish a committee to develop closer cooperation.<sup>65</sup>

In May, Iraq and Saudi Arabia took a coordinated position in favor of a nine-month oil production cut by OPEC members after a trip to Baghdad by Saudi Arabia's Minister of Energy, Industry, and Mineral Resources Khalid al-Falih, the first such visit in over 30 years.<sup>66</sup> Finally, on June 19, 2017 Abadi made an official visit to Riyadh to promote reconciliation during a Gulf regional tour that also included Iran and Kuwait.<sup>67</sup> As if echoing the hopes of his hosts, Abadi declared, "We don't want to be part of any axis," and specified that he hoped that his visit to Saudi Arabia could help promote reconciliation between Sunnis and Shias inside Iraq. In another highly significant development, Iraqi Interior Minister Qasim al-Araji led a high-level delegation to Riyadh for talks, including a meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.<sup>68</sup> He announced the formation of joint committees with the Saudi Interior Ministry to secure borders, combat drugs, and exchange intelligence and counterterrorism information, as well as facilitating visas for Iraqis to visit Saudi Arabia for religious and other purposes.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout 2017, high-level contacts continued to build. Notably, Abadi returned to Riyadh in October to inaugurate, along with King Salman and U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, a new Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council that both sides said reflected long-standing connections of "fraternity, blood, history and destiny" between the two countries.<sup>70</sup> During the visit, the Iraqi prime minister again met with the Saudi crown prince.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Taimur Khan, "[Saudi Foreign Minister Visits Iraq in First Such Trip for 27 Years](#)," *The National*, February 25, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> "[Iraq's Abadi Visits Saudis To Promote Reconciliation Between Shia, Sunnis](#)," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, June 20, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Huthifa Fayyad, "[Renewed Saudi-Iraq Ties 'to Rival Iran's Influence'](#)," *Al Jazeera*, October 25, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Ahmed Rasheed and Ernest Scheyder, "[Saudi Arabia, Iraq Agree Oil Output Cut Needs Nine-Month Extension](#)," *Reuters*, May 22, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> "[Iraq's Abadi Visits Saudis To Promote Reconciliation Between Shia, Sunnis](#)," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, June 20, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> "[Iraq's Interior Minister Meets with Saudi Crown Prince](#)," *The National*, July 19, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> "[Joint Committees Between Iraq And Saudi To Share Intelligence, Combat Terrorism and Secure Borders](#)," *Rudaw.net*, June 18, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Ghazanfar Ali Khan, "[King Salman Hails Iraq's Gains against Terrorism at Council Launch](#)," *Arab News*, October 22, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> "[Saudi Crown Prince Discusses Anti-Terror Fight with Iraq PM](#)," *RiyadhVision*, October 23, 2017.

Meanwhile, lower-level officials proceeded with the more mundane work of reconstructing bilateral relations that had been neglected for more than 30 years. Ministers laid the groundwork for rebuilding the main international road, and possibly the railway, between Iraq and Saudi Arabia,<sup>72</sup> and developing economic and investment relations.<sup>73</sup> The Arar border crossing is being prepared for reopening.<sup>74</sup> Iraq's ambassador to Saudi Arabia said the Saudi consulate in Najaf may be reopened soon.<sup>75</sup> The first direct flights between the two countries in 27 years were scheduled, and began in October 2017.<sup>76</sup> High-level military talks were resumed.<sup>77</sup> At a meeting in Basra in December 2017, Iraq and Saudi Arabia signed 18 memoranda of understanding on energy issues.<sup>78</sup> After decades of avoiding each other on the pitch, the national soccer teams of the two countries recently competed in a match, after which Saudi Arabia pledged to build a massive stadium in Iraq to commemorate the event.<sup>79</sup> Iraq is trying to be relieved of a long-standing ban on hosting home games by the sport's controlling body, FIFA, and the Saudi team's visit strongly bolsters that case. New levels of bilateral cooperation have emerged on a vast range of vital, albeit sometimes quotidian, issues.

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*Abadi declared, "We don't want to be part of any axis," and specified that he hoped that his visit to Saudi Arabia could help promote reconciliation between Sunnis and Shias inside Iraq.*

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Saudi Arabia's new relationship with Iraq also clearly influenced its reaction to the Kurdish independence referendum in fall 2017. Many Gulf Arabs had become highly sympathetic to Kurdish ambitions in northern Iraq, viewing a strengthened KRG as an important bulwark against Iranian domination of the whole country. Some also quietly suggested that one of the best ways of promoting the shared interests of Gulf countries and Iraqi Sunni Arabs would be to extend Iraq's federal arrangement with the KRG to the Sunni-majority provinces in Iraq's western regions. That would not only help disperse power in Iraq, strengthen Sunni and Shia moderates, and weaken Iran, but a strong Sunni region in the west combined with a robust KRG in the north would make an Iranian-controlled "land bridge" from Tehran to Beirut, running through Iraq and Syria, virtually impossible. For these reasons, there was a great deal of support for Kurdish aspirations, and even the referendum itself, in Gulf Arab opinion as expressed in traditional and social media. However, Saudi Arabia officially advised Kurdish leaders not to hold the vote in order to maintain their improved relations with Baghdad, and perhaps because they foresaw the negative consequences.<sup>80</sup> King Salman therefore reiterated Riyadh's support of Iraq's national unity for that purpose, and because fully realized Kurdish independence is not the Saudis' preferred outcome, although a highly decentralized, confederated Iraq may be.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Nayef Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Arabia Starts Repairing Crossing with Iraq," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, July 25, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> "Iraqi Government Announces Measures to Strengthen Ties with Saudi Arabia," *The National*, August 1, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> "Go Ahead Given for Border Point with Iraq in Arar," *Saudi Gazette*, November 1, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Ali Mamouri, "Saudi Arabia Looks to Expand Its Footprint in Iraq," *Al-Monitor*, March 20, 2018.

<sup>76</sup> "Saudi Arabian Airlines Resumes Flying to Iraq after 27 Years," *Reuters*, October 30, 2017.

<sup>77</sup> "Saudi-Iraqi Military Talks Held in Riyadh," *Al Arabiya*, October 19, 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Mohamed Mostafa, "Iraq, Saudi Arabia Sign 18 Energy Memorandums in Basra," *Iraqi News*, December 5, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Alastair Tancred, "Biggest Football Stadium in the World with Capacity of 135,000 Will Be Built in Baghdad as a Gift from Saudi Arabia's King after 4-1 Victory for Iraq," *Daily Mail*, March 13, 2018.

<sup>80</sup> "Saudi Arabia Says Hopes Kurdistan Vote Will Not Take Place," *Reuters*, September 20, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> "Saudi King Reaffirm Support to Iraq's Unity, Rejects Kurdistan Referendum," *Kuwait News Agency*, October 16, 2017.

## What Comes Next? The May Election and Beyond

Since summer 2017, there have been consistent rumors that Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi heir apparent who may rule the kingdom for many decades, would personally visit Iraq.<sup>82</sup> These rumors have been denied by Saudi authorities and mainly came from Iraqi Sunni Member of Parliament Saadoun al-Dulaimi, who might be trying to use the media to create a diplomatic fait accompli.<sup>83</sup> However, reports that Saudi security personnel have been visiting Baghdad, potentially to prepare for such an event, underscore that this could happen soon.<sup>84</sup> But it was always far more likely to take place after Iraq's May parliamentary elections, which will determine much about the political future of the country and its relations with Saudi Arabia. Mohammed bin Salman may feel that relations with Iraq are not developed sufficiently yet to warrant a personal visit from the future monarch. Or the calculation may be that Abadi's electoral chances, an important aspect of bilateral relations, would be better served by a visit after the elections.

Saudi hopes largely rest on Abadi staying in office; on the national level he represents serious prospects for a

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*Many Gulf Arabs had become highly sympathetic to Kurdish ambitions in northern Iraq, viewing a strengthened KRG as an important bulwark against Iranian domination of the whole country.*

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continued opening to the kingdom. His two main rivals are Maliki and, perhaps worse, Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Organization and a veteran of Shia militia activity and pro-Iranian politics. Should either of these figures, or one of their associates, end up as prime minister, the expectation would be a major shift in Iraqi foreign policy back toward Tehran and away from Riyadh. The Saudi appeal to Iraqi Shia leaders is straightforward and nationalistic: You are Iraqis not Iranians; you have your own national interests; we offer you independence through equidistance between your two powerful neighbors. That would, at least, deny Iran complete domination of a country it came to believe, following the U.S. invasion in 2003, was virtually under its control for the foreseeable future.

But Abadi is not the only Iraqi Shia figure who plays an important role. Saudi outreach has gone both deep and wide, and found a good deal of fertile ground. Perhaps the most striking moment in the wave of rapprochement in 2017 was the image of Sadr meeting with Mohammed bin Salman in July.<sup>85</sup> Given Sadr's history of sectarian politics, association with urban gangs and other violent groups, and formerly strong ties to Iran, many outside analysts were astounded at this development.<sup>86</sup> However, Sadr has adopted a highly nationalistic, Iraq-

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<sup>82</sup> "Al-Abadi Associate: MBS to Visit Iraq," *Baghdadtoday.news*, August 18, 2017; "Saudi Crown Prince Bin Salman to Visit Baghdad Soon," *The Baghdad Post*, October 29, 2017; Habib Toumi, "Saudi Crown Prince to Visit Iraq," *Gulf News*, March 16, 2018.

<sup>83</sup> "Following Protests, Riyadh Denies MbS Will Visit Iraq," *The New Arab*, March 31, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> "Saudi Special Forces Arrive in Baghdad," *Elaph*, March 15, 2018.

<sup>85</sup> "Iraqi Shi'ite Leader Sadr Makes Rare Visit to Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, July 31, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> "Muqtada Al-Sadr: Riyadh Serves as Regional 'Father Figure,'" *Al Arabiya*, August 12, 2017.

first, populist appeal and developed surprisingly strong pockets of support among urban Iraqi Sunnis. In addition, he has developed an antagonistic relationship toward Iran and its proxies<sup>87</sup> such as the PMF groups, raising the prospect that Sadr and Riyadh share mutual interests.<sup>88</sup>

Saudi Arabia's new opening in Iraq is, perhaps paradoxically, partly a function of the overwhelming strength, particularly between Baghdad and Basra, of the Iraqi Shia communities. In much of the country their control is sufficiently consolidated so that they can explore their own internal rivalries and, in the process, break with Iran, without inviting a return to subordination at Sunni hands. Moreover, pro-Iranian politics in Iraq and its constituencies are entirely dominated by groups like Maliki's wing of Dawa or the Badr Organization that are virtually extensions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. That orientation allows no room to maneuver in terms of either policy or politics, and therefore is unappealing to figures such as Abadi or Sadr.

Abadi claims that the improved relations have come "unconditionally" and that he has not promised Riyadh anything specific.<sup>89</sup> This is entirely likely. The two countries manifestly share certain interests such as the defeat of ISIL, which Saudi Arabia has welcomed, and stability in the oil market and conditions that benefit energy exporters. There are other advantages for Iraqi Shia leaders who align themselves with Saudi Arabia or, at least, maintain a degree of neutrality between Tehran and Riyadh. Saudi cooperation, particularly on trade and investment issues, offers much to Iraqis who are willing to grasp an outstretched hand. Moreover, for Iraqi leaders cooperation with Riyadh usually dovetails with Washington's interests and would help them secure all of the advantages offered by the United States.

Iraqi leaders expressed disappointment at the international, and Gulf Arab, response to the Iraqi reconstruction donor meeting in Kuwait at the beginning of 2018, on the grounds that they wanted \$88 billion<sup>90</sup> and only got pledges of \$30 billion.<sup>91</sup> At least \$4 billion, though, has been pledged by the Gulf Arab countries, and, presumably, that could be increased as relations improve.

Meanwhile, Iran may be at the limit of what it can invest in Iraq. Moreover, there are strong cultural, historical, and familial ties between Saudi Arabia and parts of southern Iraq, particularly in the Basra area. Saudi Arabia and Iraq are not alien territories for each other, and while Iran has certain, primarily religious and political, advantages Saudi Arabia also has cultural, linguistic, and historical assets. Iraq is majority Shia, but it is also overwhelmingly Arab, and most Iraqi Shias fought for their country loyally during the war with Iran. Much has changed since that era, but Iraq's Arab character was never irrelevant, and it hasn't evaporated.

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<sup>87</sup> "Saudi Renews Iraq Ties in Bid to Distance Iran," *The Straits Times*, August 22, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> "Abadi Rejects Al-Sadr Call to Dissolve Hashd Al-Shaabi," *Al Jazeera*, August 5, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Suadad Al-Salhy, "Saudi-Iraqi Relations Have Unconditionally Improved, Iraq PM Abadi Says," *Arab News*, December 6, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Margaret Coker and Harris Gardiner, "Iraq Wants \$88 Billion for Rebuilding. Allies Offer a Fraction of That," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, "Donor Conference Pledges \$30bn to Help Iraq Rebuild after Isis," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2018.

The outcome of the elections appears to be critical for the next phase of reconciliation, and Riyadh is banking on an Abadi victory. However, it's entirely possible that Abadi could get a second term and prove to be much more committed to a pro-Iranian policy than widely expected. His abortive efforts to create an election coalition with some of the PMF militias raises real questions about such a possibility.<sup>92</sup>

For Saudi Arabia, Iraq represents not only a crucial challenge, but also an exceptionally important experiment in delicate and difficult diplomacy. Saudi Arabia has traditionally relied on a hypercautious foreign policy underwritten by a U.S. military and diplomatic umbrella of protection. Over the past 10 years, that umbrella has shrunk a great deal, forcing Saudi Arabia to move quickly to defend itself and its interests in the region. In several vital instances, this new proactive Saudi foreign and regional policy has relied on force, such as in Yemen and Bahrain, or on coercion, such as in Lebanon. However, given the difficulty of the challenge in Iraq and the limitations of Saudi leverage there, the outreach to Baghdad since September 2014 has been entirely based on the art of inducement and persuasion.

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Iraq is the only major regional battleground at present in which Saudi Arabia is relying almost entirely on carrots rather than sticks. Yet, arguably, more has been accomplished by Riyadh over the past year in Iraq than, for example, in either Yemen or Lebanon. This suggests that Saudi policies – despite the intricacy and sensitivity of the outreach to Iraq – have gained an impressive degree of ground at a very limited cost and virtually no risk or exposure. This is not to suggest that the “honey rather than vinegar” approach that Saudi Arabia has employed in Iraq in the past few years has always been optimal, or even appropriate. But Saudi Arabia’s outreach in Iraq, particularly in 2017, belies the stereotype of a rash, reckless, and uncontrolled new major regional actor, showing instead that Saudi Arabia can be deft and delicate when it wants to. That’s an important lesson for the rest of the world, but also for Saudi Arabia itself, to ponder.

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<sup>92</sup> Omer Al-Nidawi, “Abadi and the PME,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 7, 2018.

