

# Improving Iraq-GCC Relations: No Time Like the Present

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With the battle for Mosul over, the Iraqi government now turns to the mop-up stage to eject the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from its remaining strongholds. It also contemplates the far greater challenges to come, including the reconstruction of Mosul and indeed large swathes of the rest of the country; the effort to resettle an estimated 3.4 million internally displaced persons; and the creation of a credible national reconciliation program aimed at putting Iraq's zero-sum identity politics in the rear-view mirror. Security concerns continue to loom large, with ISIL remnants expected to engage in a campaign of terrorism to subvert government efforts to foster stability. Iranian influence is at an all-time high, casting a shadow over national elections to be held next year.

There is another challenge, however, that bears on all the others: how can Iraq be reintegrated into the Arab world, particularly in terms of improving its relations with its Gulf neighbors, in a way that will support its stability as well as the security of the Gulf region?

There are no easy answers to this question, which has vexed Iraqi leaders and US policymakers for well over a decade. The present moment, with political crisis in the GCC and the strengthening of the Iranian challenge on several fronts, makes a solution more urgent and important than ever.

**Wells of Suspicion, but Some Promising Signs**  
Arab ambivalence regarding Iraq stems from the aftermath of the US-led invasion in 2003.

The attitudes of the Gulf states toward the government in Baghdad have ranged from suspicion to contempt, with a large measure of fear thrown in. The Gulf states repeatedly warned against US military action to unseat Saddam Hussein in the run-up to the American-led invasion; in the aftermath, they simultaneously lambasted the United States for its actions while warning that Washington must not disengage from Iraq. This, in the view of Saudi Arabia and others, would only compound the damage resulting from the US effectively having handed Iraq over to Iran as a "gift on a golden platter," as Saudi King Abdullah told US diplomats in 2005.

Concerned about the rising influence of Iran—leveraged by Tehran's close ties to Shia politicians and its support for heavily armed militias—the Arab states have been reluctant to embrace the new Iraq. Even as a self-interested effort to pry Baghdad away from Tehran, they have not made serious attempts to counterbalance Iran in its efforts to transform Iraq into a vassal state and cement its land bridge from Tehran to Beirut (the "Shia crescent" King Abdullah of Jordan famously warned about in 2004). Among the Gulf countries, only Kuwait has tried to engage Iraq in some depth, as it sees the stability of its northern neighbor as crucial to its own future.

There has been some recent movement suggesting the Gulf states may be moving to engage Iraq more fully in issues of Gulf security and regional stability. During his visit to Baghdad in February, Saudi Foreign Minister

Adel al-Jubeir stressed that Baghdad and Riyadh share a common interest in the fight against terrorism. Iraq was a participant in this year's Eager Lion military exercise, a yearly war game held in Jordan involving 20 countries. And Iraqi president Fuad Masum attended the Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh in May with US President Donald Trump. Zafer al-Ani, a Sunni Arab member of Iraq's parliament, told Al-Monitor that these developments are all part of an effort to bring "Iraq back to the Arab ranks, after it has been under the influence of Iran since 2003." He added that all Iraq's neighbors, "especially Saudi Arabia, ought to help Iraq financially and militarily to get it out from under Iran's influence."

Indeed, Iraqi-Saudi Arabian relations have shown intermittent signs of improvement over the last few years. Riyadh—from which most Gulf countries often take their cue regarding Iraq—had closed its embassy following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. In 2015, it appointed a new ambassador and opened an embassy in Baghdad the next year. This was a major development: Riyadh had largely shunned Iraq during the prime ministership of Nouri al-Maliki, whom it considered a deeply sectarian leader and a tool of Tehran. But the embassy decision appeared to demonstrate the Saudis were at last willing to move on and try to work with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a more conciliatory figure who took office in 2014 and was thought to be relatively inclusive in his approach to his country's Sunni population. Iraqi analyst Mustafa Alani told Reuters that Saudi Arabia feels that "if they leave Mr. Abadi

without help, he will be forced to go to the Iranians...With the change of leadership, change of circumstances, they think that it's time to bring back Iraq...to the Arab fold and to reduce the Iranian influence."

### **One Step Forward, Two Steps Back**

In general, however, these overtures have been more the exception than the rule, with economic relations slow to develop and diplomatic engagement halting at best. Overall engagement has been lacking; the Arab states of the Gulf have kept Iraq at arm's length, concerned not only by the disquieting Iranian role but Iraq's internal dysfunction and its seemingly boundless needs, as well as their own confusion about what goals to pursue with regard to Iraq.

Riyadh has been particularly ambivalent. Saudi Arabia's ambassador was sent home in 2016 after a tenure of little more than a year after making statements critical of Iran-backed Shia paramilitaries, and the bilateral relationship remains fraught. The Saudis appear convinced that, given the sectarian nature of Iraq's politics and the weakness of their natural allies within the Sunni community, they do not have a particularly strong hand to play. In addition, to them engagement is essentially useless, especially when faced with other priorities, such as the wars in Yemen and Syria.

Iraq's refusal to take sides in the dispute between Qatar and other GCC countries doubtless rankled Saudi Arabia. Reports that the Iraqi government hosted a meeting in June

between the Qatari foreign minister and Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force—though denied by Doha—can only have reinforced Saudi suspicions of Iraqi intentions.

### **What's Past Is Past. What's the Way Forward?**

Intensive Arab engagement with Iraq might have worked in the 2005-2009 period, the years when Iraq's nascent government was finding its way under a new constitution and in the aftermath of America's successful troop surge and a bilateral agreement on a blueprint for a deep relationship between Iraq and the United States (the Strategic Framework Agreement). Had Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States been able to rouse themselves, stop sulking, and refrain from brooding about the ascendancy of the Shia in Baghdad, it would have been easier at least to lay the groundwork for a more businesslike relationship and neutralize some of Iran's influence. That moment is long gone. Iran, unlike the Arab states, has successfully played a long game to cement its influence, and it is too well entrenched in Iraqi politics and security matters to be dislodged now. But by adopting a sustained, comprehensive engagement strategy with Iraq, Saudi Arabia and its allies may be able at least to tilt the playing table and gain Iraqi cooperation on some issues of key importance.

This approach is not easy and requires a basic shift in the way the Arab states view Iraq. Reversing Iran's influence in Iraq is not practical; the two countries' shared history and long border are significant, and their religious

and economic ties are deep. And the wasted years following the US withdrawal in 2011 and the unremitting Arab hostility toward the Maliki government left Baghdad little choice but to strengthen relations with Tehran. Saudi Arabia and its allies would be wise to acknowledge this reality and identify new pathways to approach Iraq.

Expanding economic ties and ramping up reconstruction assistance in the post-Mosul phase is one such path. The GCC states are natural economic partners for Iraq, particularly in the Sunni heartland where Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have tribal and political ties. Kurdistan, with its openness to business and a relatively benign security situation, is another eager partner. Infrastructure and agriculture (a field which, if properly developed, would help Iraq diversify its economy and export profile) are key areas where investment would be welcome. Iraq can do its part not only by improving security but by ensuring transparent legal frameworks and strong protections for investors.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states may also deepen their diplomatic engagement with Iraq. All of the Gulf states have diplomatic missions in Baghdad now, but most embassies have minimal staffing. While valid security concerns must be addressed, staff could be expanded and their responsibilities elaborated in scope and focus. Attachés experienced in agriculture, education, and cultural programs would be useful additions to the GCC embassies' functional range. Most important, ambassadors

and their diplomats could be instructed to broaden outreach not only with politicians and influencers in the center, including the Shia political class, but to expand contacts with Iraq's regional politicians, parties, and religious leaders, including Shia clergy. This is vitally important for the Arabs' understanding of Iraqi political trends and their ability to influence Iraqis' political thinking.

Intensified leadership contacts and exchanges of visits across a wide range of ministries would reinforce diplomatic engagement and stimulate more productive dialogue.

In addition, the states of the Gulf could coordinate more closely with the United States on working effectively with Iraq, a policy goal of Washington for many years. Prime Minister Abadi's visit to the United States in March 2017 was deemed a success, both on substance and in terms of building personal rapport with Trump; it also laid the groundwork for expansion of ties, including revitalizing the Strategic Framework Agreement. Given the favorable outcome of Trump's visit to the Gulf in May, which raised the possibility of tighter US-GCC coordination on a number of regional issues, the Gulf states could work more closely with the Trump Administration to advance ties and mutual interests with Baghdad. It is noteworthy that Iraq's participation in the Riyadh summit provoked concerned commentary in Iran; indeed, creating some consternation in Tehran would be one benefit of this course of action. Further, expanding Iraq's role in regional military exercises and, when possible and

appropriate, in security cooperation (Syria being one possibility) is another.

Finally, the GCC states would do well to resist the temptation to give up on the government in Baghdad and play regional political favorites against the center. Encouraging Sunni resentments and providing rhetorical or material support for another round of resistance to the national government, or expanding relations with Kurdistan at the expense of Iraqi unity, would add further stress to Iraqi politics and play into Iran's hands. A balanced approach that deals with all the key actors in Iraq's rambunctious political system is the only reasonable way forward. It is also the one with the greatest chance of some success for Gulf interests.

### **The Iraqi Role**

Iraq, of course, has its own role to play in creating the conditions to encourage Gulf states to re-engage successfully. The government and its allies could be more careful to curb excessive pro-Iran rhetoric and to acknowledge the validity of the Gulf states' concerns about Iranian behavior. A more neutral stance in this case would be a net asset. Second, it would be important for the government to rebuild the Sunni areas devastated by the war against ISIL and focus on economic revitalization in the Sunni heartland. Third, Baghdad can do whatever is possible to prevent the country from becoming a free-flowing pipeline for the delivery of fighters and materiel to the Asad regime in Syria, despite Iran's efforts to keep such a pipeline open. Attempts that are seen as

sincere, even if not fully effective, could have a positive political impact.

Fourth, while identity politics will continue to roil Iraq, Prime Minister Abadi would do well to forge ahead with his professed desire to foster national reconciliation. He faces stiff headwinds from within the Shia bloc, but he must nevertheless persevere in the effort.

### **In Crisis, an Opportunity**

At present, both Iraq and the Gulf states face serious challenges. Threats to regional stability, despite the rout of the Islamic State in Mosul, are growing. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies

would do well to view this moment as an opportunity to bring Iraq back and closer to the Arab center. Baghdad has shown a willingness to play along, including by acting as a mediator to improve relations between Riyadh and Tehran—a role to which it is well suited. Iraqi leaders may also welcome greater GCC contacts as a way to counterbalance Iran. Such approaches will pay dividends over the long run in terms of generating new opportunities for cooperation with the United States, contributing to the stability of Iraq, and creating new complications for Tehran's regional agenda.