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Abadi's Riyadh visit augurs well for Iraqi-Saudi relations

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“The courting of Sadr and Hakim and the sudden honeymoon with Abadi show that something is changing – rather fast – in Riyadh, Baghdad and Tehran itself.”

Despite significant reservations over Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who famously rained its cities with missiles in 1991, Saudi Arabia was never too happy with the political elites who replaced him in 2003, writing them off as stooges of the Iranian regime. Nearly all of them were Shias who had either spent their exile in Iran or received funds at some point of their careers from the country. For Saudi officials, they were automatic suspects, guilty of being creations of the mullahs of Tehran.

However, heralding a potential rapprochement between the Iraqi political elite and Saudi Arabia was the arrival of two senior Iraqi politicians – Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari – in Riyadh. This was the second high-profile visit in four months.

Thirteen years ago, Abadi was a minister of communications and Jaafari had a stint as prime minister. Both were members of the Dawa Party, an all-Shia movement funded for years by the Iranian government. Saudi Arabia originally refused to court either politician and both were highly critical of Riyadh, accusing it of bankrolling what was called the “Sunni insurgency” that led to the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Such opinions were also voiced by their colleague and boss, Nuri al-Maliki, a ranking member of Dawa who was prime minister from 2006-14 and is currently vice-president of Iraq. During his tenure,

Sunnis were purged from a senior government office, de-Ba'athification laws were imposed and senior former regime officials – all of them Sunnis – were hanged, headed, of course, by Saddam himself. The sight of him at the hangman's noose facing masked executioners wearing black sent shivers down the spines of Saudi officials, especially as they chanted “Muqtada, Muqtada.”

Muqtada al-Sadr was an all-time Iranian favourite who emerged to lead the urban poor of the Iraqi Shia community, becoming an overnight star, kingmaker and leader. He commanded death squads that roamed the streets of Baghdad, settling old scores with Sunni Muslims. Last April he seemed to be distancing himself from Tehran, calling on its top ally, Bashar Assad, to step down as president of Syria. This summer, Sadr visited the Saudi port city of Jeddah, meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz.

A parliamentary ally yet family foe Ammar al-Hakim, another veteran Iranian stooge, was also parting ways with Tehran, stepping down from his capacity as chief of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, an Iranian creation that was used to fight Saddam's army in the 1980s. Then came a surprise visit by Maliki, not to Tehran but to Moscow, where he tried to breathe life into a stagnated \$2 billion arms deal. Maliki was Iran's number one ally in Iraq. By heading to Moscow, he was sending signals that he might be on the lookout for new patrons

and allies.

The courting of Sadr and Hakim and the sudden honeymoon with Abadi show that something is changing – rather fast – in Riyadh, Baghdad and Tehran itself. For Iran, it clearly shows that the patronage system it carefully upheld since 2003 was showing serious cracks, mostly because of a lack of funds. Too much money was apparently spent on the Syrian battlefield, greatly affecting the sustainability of Iran's Shia protégé in Iraq.

True, Iran had created all of those figures but it was struggling to pull through with them, prompting all three to look for help – and money – elsewhere. Within Baghdad, the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia comes ahead of parliamentary elections in April. The three ambitious Shia politicians are no longer satisfied with coming across as “Iran-made” or “Shia leaders.” They want to expand into a cross-sectarian power base, which might be very difficult because of their murky past, and are seeking Saudi funds to do that.

Finally, in Riyadh, it shows that the strategic hand of Crown Prince Mohammed jumping behind enemy lines and eating away at Iran's power base within Iraqi society. For years the Saudis tried everything to dismantle Iran's Arab fiefdoms, from character assassinations to accusing Tehran's proxies of being traitors, agents and sectarian tools in the hands of the ayatollah. That led to absolutely nothing – the more the Saudis trashed them, the closer

these figures clung to Iran – often for lack of a better alternative.

Over the past year-and-a-half, Crown Prince Mohammed has been pursuing an entirely different approach. He is courting the Iraqi Shias, treating them with respect as veteran statesmen, winning hearts, before pockets, in Baghdad. When summoned to Tehran for dictates or consultation, these men are treated as employees rather than statesmen and leaders. Turbaned patrons who created them rarely show them the respect that they expect.

Saudi Arabia is walking an extra mile to please its new friends in Baghdad. It reopened borders this year and resumed commercial flights for the first time in three decades. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir has stressed that his country wants to take part in the rebuilding of Iraq, emphasising its “Arab Gulf” identity.

Under the crown prince's guidance, he is trying to close every channel through which the Iranians entered Iraqi politics in 2003. After 14 years, money, power and pomp matter more to these Iraqi politicians than a dogmatic discourse on Shia religious history, which remains a cornerstone for the Iranians. Unlike their Lebanese ally Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who remains committed to Iran, both ideologically and politically, these figures go for the higher bidder and, at present, this seems to be the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, rather than Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei or President Hassan Rohani.

It's not enough to wish ISIS fighters dead

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“The terms of the debate are blunt. The West doesn't want extremist nationals back.”

British government minister recently addressed the unique international difficulties posed by the Islamic State's loss of territory and the shrinking of the country it audaciously named after itself. In that harsh line, he laid bare the complexities of the case. With the Islamic State's defeat, the foreign fighters who pledged their troth to the brutal extremist group would want to return home. What should their home countries do with them? What could they do about them and for them?

The answer, British minister Rory Stewart said, is to wish fervently for their death. It is better, he said of the estimated 400 Britons with the Islamic State (ISIS), “to be serious about the fact these people are a serious danger to us and, unfortunately, the only way of dealing with them will be, in almost every case, to kill them.”

The uncompromising stance may have seemed surprising from Stewart. A former diplomat who served in Iraq, Stewart is an intrepid and empathetic travel writer. He has walked through Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and Libya and run a charitable crafts association in Afghanistan. He is

one of the few in Western public life to acknowledge that the 2003 Iraq invasion had been an almighty mistake. If anyone might see the grey in a seemingly black-and-white situation, Stewart would be the one.

And yet Stewart isn't much of an outlier among Western officials. Just days earlier, French Defence Minister Florence Parly spelt out her hopes for the fighters, more of whom joined ISIS from France than any other Western European country. “If the jihadis perish in this fight, I would say that's for the best,” she said.

The American opinion was summed up by Brett McGurk, special presidential envoy for the global anti-ISIS coalition. “Our mission is to make sure that any foreign fighter who is here, who joined ISIS from a foreign country and came into Syria, they will die here in Syria,” he said.

The terms of the debate are blunt. The West doesn't want extremist nationals back. It would rather they conveniently perish on the battlefield than have to deal with repatriation. The anti-ISIS coalition has given names and photos of Western fighters to the Kurds. One People's Protection Units (YPG) official was quoted as saying they would be

“eliminated.” Even so, there is the chance some foreign jihadists will escape. There is the possibility they will be forcibly returned to the coalition, after which, repatriation is the only option.

Though the West has been the most voluble, governments in the Middle East and North Africa and in Muslim countries in South-east Asia face the same challenges. A report by the Soufan Group and the Global Strategy Network said the contours of the problem are troublingly vague but clear nonetheless. At least 5,600 ISIS fighters from 33 countries have gone home. That includes 900 Turks, 800 Tunisians and some 760 Saudis. Approximately 20-30% of the European jihadists have returned, though it's 50% of those from Britain, Denmark and Sweden.

The report, titled “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” said Libya and the Philippines are particularly vulnerable to the reverse flow from ISIS's failed caliphate. With their own returning citizens come other fighters, seeking refuge in or revenge out of Muslim countries.

Statistically speaking, it's a big problem. From 2011, more than 40,000 foreigners from more than

110 countries travelled to join ISIS. A mere 7,400 were Westerners, 5,000 of them from Europe.

Obviously, it would be for the best, “the preferred resolution,” in the words of Bruce Hoffman, director of Georgetown University's Security Studies Programme, if they didn't return. “What worries me,” Hoffman added, “is I think it's wishful thinking that they're all going to be killed off.”

Clearly, there is an urgent need to prepare for the likelihood of the fighters' return. This must be by rule of law. In Europe, where the death penalty has been abolished, they would have to be tried (possibly for treason as well as criminal activity) and in some cases, the obviously brainwashed and repentant would need to be rehabilitated.

The Soufan report acknowledged the defects in each approach. Incarceration risks further radicalisation or the radicalisation of fellow inmates, it said. Also, rehabilitation and reintegration is hard, especially when many fighters “were never integrated in the first place.”

The solution is not as obvious as the scale of the problem but this much is evident: It's not enough to wish ISIS fighters dead.

TheArabWeekly

Published by Al Arab Publishing House

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