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Filling the post-Daesh 'Sunni void': Saudi Arabia's official return to Iraqi politics.

Saudi Arabia's returns officially to Iraqi politics: for the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein, a Saudi official met with an Iraqi counterpart in Baghdad. But for Riyadh, the road towards renewed leverage in Iraq is still ahead.

On February 25, 2017, Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabia's minister of foreign affairs, travelled to the Iraqi capital to discuss with PM Haider al-Abadi. On March 23, 2017, al-Abadi and al-Jubeir met for the second time on the sidelines of the summit of the Global Coalition against Daesh, in Washington.

As long as the Gulf states remain marginalized in Syria's conflict resolution attempts, Saudi Arabia is going to intensify outreach efforts in Iraq: mainly because of the presence of the so-called caliphate, the Syrian and the Iraqi scenarios have never been so interplayed as today are.

With regard to the Levant, Saudi Arabia has to cope now with an uncomfortable geopolitical picture. Since 2003, Teheran has been gaining material and immaterial influence in the Levant: this is an unintended consequence of Washington's decision to oust the Baathist regime in Baghdad. In 2011, when popular protests against the Assad's regime erupted in Dera'a, Riyadh eyed the possibility to break the "Shia crescent" which connected Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. But since 2012, the regionalization of the Syrian crisis has allowed Iran, Hezbollah and Russia to save Damascus' regime, securing what they call "useful Syria". In the meantime, the Shia arc of influence has become more than a 'crescent', encompassing also Sana'a.

Given these premises, the Saudis work to contain Iran's regional power as much they can do. Therefore, waiting for Iraqi parliamentary elections in 2018, supporting al-Abadi's government with respect to former PM Nuri al-Maliki's rentrée ambitions and the ascendance of Shia militias (as the institutionalized Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF) stand at the top of Saudi Arabia's purposes. Among many obstacles, al-Abadi has always accepted the inclusion or, in some cases, the re-integration of the Arab Sunni community in Iraq's institutions and public life.

Similar to other contexts, Riyadh follows two intersected levels of outreach vis-à-vis the marginalized Arab Sunni community: the formal one, which implies al-Abadi's government active support by the Saudis and the informal one, which looks for direct ties' strengthening with the Arab Sunnis of Iraq, through the tribal connection. The Turkey and Gulf states' sponsored closed-door meeting held in Istanbul on March 8, 2017, was an attempt to unify the fragmented Arab Sunni front under the banner of the "Coalition of Iraqi National Forces", involving 25 tribal chiefs, clerics and lawmakers.

Saudi Arabia and Gulf monarchies' effort is timely because of Daesh's territorial losses, but given past experiences they can't bet on sectarian tones to regain leverage in the area. Syria and Iraq's borderlands (Deir e-Zor and al-Anbar regions) represent traditionally a single social space, where the Saudis can rely on ancient kinship ties and marriage alliances. The genesis of the jihadi phenomenon in these peripheries must be traced in widespread social disenfranchisement from the political centre. Therefore, addressing the Sunni issue is imperative, for the Gulf states, also to downplay the future resurgence of large-scale jihadi upheavals, since adaptability is the key-word to understand contemporary armed jihadism.

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