



GULF May 2019

Iraq's Dual State Seeking for a Neutral Foreign Policy

In a context of rising escalation along the US-Iran-Saudi triangle, Iraq has been trying to seal domestic balances from geopolitical tensions playing the card of diplomacy. But Baghdad's efforts to insulate itself from the implications of other agendas have to cope with the reality of a country which has been developing into a dual state, given the growing political and economic role of Tehran's related military actors.

Not only Baghdad is at the centre of a long-time, Saudi-Iranian rivalry for the hegemony in the Middle East; Iraq – and each meeting with Iraqi institutional figures – have become the occasion for escalating messages among the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia, as in the case of the unscheduled visit of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (7th of May 2019) in Baghdad. The recent reopening of the Saudi embassy in the capital, with the restoration of diplomatic and commercial relations, has further accelerated this trend.

The 11th of March 2019, the Iranian president Hassan Rouhani visited Iraq for the first time, meeting with Iraqi president Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi; a series of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) were signed on oil, trade, health and the possibility of a railway linking Basra with the border city of Shalamchah. On the 11th of April 2019, Abdul-Mahdi travelled to Saudi Arabia with a delegation of businessmen: 13 agreements were inked by Riyadh and Baghdad on topics such as energy, agriculture, education and culture. The Iraqi Prime Minister met with both king Salman and his son, the crown prince and minister of defence Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud. Before the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif visit in Iraq (25th of May 2019), the speaker of the Parliament, Mohammed al-Halbousi, offered to Washington and Tehran Iraq's good offices to mediate in case of request.

Iraq (and Oman as usual) has multiplied public offers of mediation to defuse the looming Gulf crisis: diplomatic brokering is the only way for Baghdad to present a 'neutral' face in the dispute while trying to

contain its internal disruptive effects. This is the reason why Iraq needs and pursues the re-building of an autonomous foreign policy to distance itself from both Washington and Tehran [Maria Fantappie and Ali Vaez, “Don’t Let Iraq Fall Victim to U.S.-Iran Rivalry”, *Foreign Affairs*, April 30, 2019]. But maybe it is too late and the country, despite the willingness of many of its institutional components, cannot be an effective arbiter in the US-Iran-Saudi geopolitical triangle.

As a matter of fact, Iraq has been informally developing as a dual state. The institutionalisation of the Hashd al-Shaabi/Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), the Iraqi Shia militias who are mostly Iranian proxies (apart from the cleric Muqtada Al Sadr and his group) in 2016 has paved the way for the rise of PMU and connected patronage: these are political, social and economic networks tied to Tehran. This trend is likely to consolidate given the end of the fight against the (territorially) defeated “Islamic State” and the return to political normalcy, which includes contested governance, unresolved social grievances, spoil system dynamics and sensitive government portfolios still to be assigned (defence and interior).

Therefore, the coexistence between the Iraqi top institutional leadership in search of a third way foreign policy with respect to Washington and Tehran, and the pro-Iranian bloc reflects the emergence of two different visions of Iraq, originating from its nascent dual structure; a dynamic resembling Rouhani and General Qassem Suleimani ‘parallel politics’ in Iran’s neighbourhood.

On the other hand, the lack of ideological cohesion and leadership within the fragmented PMU could help Iraq to carry on with a sort of ‘unbalanced balance’ in foreign policy. Pragmatic reactions by PMU’s components (such as the Badr Organisation) after a rocket was fired in the Green Zone next to the American embassy (Baghdad April 20, 2019), signal that realism and the protection of the Iraqi national interest can still play a role in its more and more complicated foreign policy [Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “US-Iranian escalation tests Tehran’s militias in Iraq”, *The National*, May 29, 2019].

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