



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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PITCH-PERFECT DIPLOMACY

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The carefully choreographed friendly football match between Saudi Arabia and Iraq in Basra last month signals new highs in bilateral relations.

On the 28th of February, the Saudi Arabian football team faced off against their Iraqi hosts in a friendly match in the Iraqi port city of Basra. It was the first time the two teams had played in Iraq in almost 3 decades. It was also the latest episode in the remarkable improvement in bilateral relations that has steadily unfolded over the last 18 months.

Bilateral relations were severed after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 but they took another downward turn after 2003. Saudi Arabia and other regional powers were alarmed at the strategic gains made by Iran in post-2003 Iraq and the dominant perception in the Arab world over much of the last 15 years was that Iraq was “lost” to Iran. Saudi Arabian media and Saudi public figures were particularly prone to viewing and framing post-2003 Iraq and Iraqi Shi’as as Iranian lackeys, traitors to Iraq and a danger to the Arab world. Conversely, Iraq (and more so Iraqi Shi’as) regarded Saudi Arabia as the chief agitator against Iraq, the principal supporter of anti-Shi’a terrorism and a primary hindrance to Iraqi stability. Matters were made all the more poisonous by the toxic personal dynamics governing Saudi-Iraqi relations during former Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s tenure (2006-2014).

All of this has changed in the last year or two. U.S. officials were reportedly behind the initial attempts at thawing Iraqi-Saudi relations in an attempt to contain Iran but the momentum was created and sustained by new leadership in both Baghdad and Riyadh. A web of factors, not least the genuine commitment to rebuilding relationships between the two capitals, has created a virtuous cycle in bilateral relations. There has been a long overdue recalculation of Saudi policy towards Iraq coupled with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s active efforts to diversify Iraq’s strategic partnerships. As bilateral relations improved, the two capitals hosted a number of high-level exchanges over the course of 2017, including a state visit in October in which the Iraqi Prime Minister was hosted by King Salman.

However, nothing compares to the symbolic capital of last month’s football match. The degree of

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official investment in the match and the careful choreography that went into it made for a massive public relations coup as Iraqis and Saudis celebrated the normalization of relations between the two. Expressions of fraternal love and public displays of mutual respect, gratitude and hospitality (complete with a twitter hashtag that translates to “[Iraq is] your home oh greens [The Saudi Arabian football team]” marked the Saudi Arabian delegation’s visit to Iraq. This was not the first cultural exchange and previous ones in the last 12 months were no less successful but few things resonate with the public as much as a football match.

It was a case of pitch-perfect public diplomacy that neatly complements the many tangible improvements in bilateral relations with a very significant and highly symbolic show of popular goodwill. It will go a long way towards further normalization of Iraqi-Saudi relations not just on a political level but on a popular one as well. By extension, this will further the normalization of post-2003 Iraq in the region. This is long overdue good news for Iraq and the region. The last 15 years have shown that for Iraq to be at peace, it needs internal reconciliation and it also needs to be at peace with all of its neighbours. Until recently, Saudi Arabia was the missing link in that framework.

Saudi thinking on Iraq seems to have shifted from attempting to work against Iraq to trying to work through it in order to secure its vital interests. This has seen Saudi Arabia’s move towards a more constructive approach that accepts post-2003 Iraq and seeks partners from within the Iraqi system rather than from discredited opponents in exile. As such, 2017 saw the reopening of border crossings between the two states, the resumption of direct flights between Riyadh and Baghdad after a 27-year hiatus and the establishment of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council to pursue further cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

From a Saudi point of view, a significant driver of the rapprochement is the need to create more distance between Baghdad and Tehran, to divide Shia political actors and to mitigate against a more Iran-tilting Iraq. There is also recognition inside Saudi Arabia that the long diplomatic hiatus with Iraq left an uncontested space for Iran to strengthen its ties with a range of Iraqi political factions. The constant in Saudi thinking on Iraq is the need to challenge Iran. This has not changed but the strategy has: instead of abandoning the playing field, Saudi Arabia now seeks to compete with Iran in Iraq and to build inroads at the highest levels of Iraqi Shia politics. This shift comes at the tail-end of a series of foreign policy setbacks in Syria, Yemen and Qatar where an assertive and militarized Saudi approach has largely failed to deliver in pushing back against Iranian influence. In Iraq however, Saudi Arabia is finally playing a more constructive role by investing in soft power and public diplomacy. When it comes to Iraq, there is no better way for Saudi Arabia to compete with Iran than by using its financial capabilities and rekindling cultural affinities – two areas where Saudis have an advantage over their Iranian nemesis.

Feel good stories are rare in Iraqi news and last month’s match has quite rightly been heavily celebrated. However, the changes underway, positive as they may be, are not irreversible. A change in leadership in Baghdad, an acute Saudi-Iranian crisis and several other scenarios can sour relations and squander recent gains. Saudi Arabia and Iraq have a complicated history that has furnished them with

grounds for both adversarial and amicable relations. The sour grapes that had underlined Saudi-Iraqi relations until recently are easily resurrected. Another concern is the extent of Saudi strategic patience. The Kingdom has to be realistic in its estimation of the extent of Iranian penetration of Iraqi politics and the Iraqi economy and must calibrate its expectations and, more importantly, its timeframes accordingly. A commitment to making a sustained effort towards strong bilateral relations must be maintained over the coming years. The Saudi king's post-match offer of a brand new stadium is a promising first step.