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Post-mediation Iraqi-Iranian-Saudi relations A reading on regional balances and security

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Since 2014

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Mustafa al-Saray*

The Iranian–Saudi agreement on 10 March last year was a major turning point in terms of bilateral relations, regional relations, and international reactions.

This agreement, which took place under Chinese auspices, and Iraqi gestures, was the most prominent event in the geopolitical transformations in the region, as the agreement between the rival poles was a step towards redrawing the region in terms of security, political and economic, as well as international variables that contribute to the stabilization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in redrawing them in the region, especially since the agreement was sponsored and guaranteed by China, the most prominent international player in the Middle East region who is trying to fill the American vacuum.

These variables contributed to the formulation of another form of Iraqi–Iranian relations – Iraq has been considered an arena for competition and conflict between the two regional poles in all forms, political, economic, security, and even cultural, which in turn generated a state of general internal and regional instability for Iraq, especially in the nature of dealing and the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and based on the importance of studying the nature of trilateral relations in light of the changes taking place in the region, especially after the events of the Al-Aqsa flood and the escalation of the war in

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Gaza, Al Bayan Center for planning and studies held a dialogue session for a group of foreign policy decision makers and former deputies in the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

The aim of this session is to discuss the post – mediation Iraqi–Iranian–Saudi relations in light of the ongoing changes in the region, this paper is a summary of what was put forward and discussed at the session, through which we tried to establish opinions, proposals and readings in trilateral relations.

Four major milestones in Iraqi–Iranian–Saudi relations:

Saudi Arabia and Iran have often acted as serious rivals for influence in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf region, since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988. While both countries identify themselves as Islamic State, the differences and discrepancies in their foreign policies are hardly more dramatic. Iraq is the most prominent and largest area of competition between the two countries for geographical, political, economic, security, and religious considerations.

Iraq is considered a buffer land area between the two countries due to its geographical location, as well as the nature of the Iraqi social composition with an Islamic majority distributed between the two most prominent Islamic communities (Shiites and Sunnis).

This factor played a prominent role in the formation of the Iraqi political system after 2003, which was formed based on two regional sectarian components, and this poses a challenge to Iran, which considers itself the protector of the Shiite doctrine in the region and the world, and the matter is no different in Saudi Arabia, which considers itself the leader and engine of the Sunni doctrine in the region and the

world, as a result of these factors and others four-time stations played a prominent role in the tripartite relations in Iraq after the change.

The first stage was the stage of change, the second stage was the stage of strategic vacuum, the third stage was the stage of security and balance, and the fourth stage was the stage of comprehensive transformation.

The stage of change.

The American invasion in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein did not prompt Riyadh to develop a diplomatic dialogue with the new state, as we find there are paradoxes in the orientations of the Gulf states in the region, especially Iraq after 2003 the American change, although most countries, headed by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is linked to a strategic agreement between them and the United States¹ :

1- The prospects of increasing the status and role of Iraq in the US strategy in contrast to the declining status of the GCC countries.

2- Doubts about the transfer of the Iraqi experience to the GCC countries and the threat to the stability of their regimes.

3- Concern about the strengthening of Iranian influence in Iraq, which raises Iran's regional status and role.

However, the GCC countries welcomed the decision to political change in Iraq, but this welcome was very cautious, but in the end, agreed with the American position in Iraq, which is the official position issued in the media, for its part, Iran faced many contradictions, including that the gains it will achieve from the fall of the anti-Iranian

1. Mohammed Karim Kazim, Mustafa Farouk Majid, Iraq and the Arabian Gulf region, the race for status and regional role, Journal of International Studies, Center for International Studies, University of Baghdad, No. 69, 2016, P. 68

ruling regime in Iraq is a great opportunity, on the one hand, and senior leaders, headed by the Supreme Leader (Ali Khamenei).

But with the start of the military operations of the international coalition forces on Iraq and the beginning of the fall of the former regime, Iran began to deal with and adapt to the matter as if it were an inevitable reality, as evidenced by Iran's participation in the Regional Conference of Iraq's neighboring countries held in Riyadh in 2003 and approved the final statement of the conference, which did not condemn the American presence in Iraq², at the same time, Iran did not declare its position and behavior towards the United States directly, and what strengthened this thing was the closure of the Iranian borders in the face of a group of Ansar al-Islam, as well as before the American fighters³, however, Muhammad's statement Khatami was even more reinforcing the position when he said that the United States has become our neighbor in the West, as well as in the East, and we have to live with the American reality in the region, despite the bitterness of it⁴.

The stage of strategic emptiness.

On November 27, 2008, the Iraqi Council of Representatives ratified the security agreement signed between the American side and the Iraqi side, which provides for the beginning of the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq no later than June 2009 and until the withdrawal of all troops no later than December 31, 2011, where the agreement provided in Article (24) for the withdrawal of American

2. Urad Mohammad Malik kamouneh, the American vision of Iran-Iraq relations (2003-2013), unpublished master's thesis, Faculty of political science, Al-Nahrain University, p.107.

3. Same source

4. Rasha Hamdi, the Bush administration's position on the Iranian nuclear program, Journal of political science, No. 153, Cairo, 2003, p. 308

troops from Iraq no later than December 31, 2011, in full⁵.

This factor had a prominent impact on the history of trilateral relations, as Iraq was witnessing tension in Arab relations and many problems with countries, headed by Saudi Arabia, Iraq often accused Saudi Arabia of financing terrorism and terrorist groups that destabilized Iraq's internal security, so the withdrawal of American troops was a factor with a negative and positive impact, for Iran, it was a good opportunity for the absence of the normal American presence.

It stated in January 2012 that the withdrawal was a great victory for all the Iraqi people, and had tried to intervene and penetrate deeply at this time, due to the removal of the most important obstacle to her, namely the United States forces in Iraq.

And this provides an opportunity to expand relations with Iraq more and penetrate deeply at this time, because of the displacement of the most important an obstacle in front of her is the American troops in Iraq⁶.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia was concerned about this, because of the strained relations with Iraq, and was trying to resolve this tension through the presence of US forces allied with Saudi Arabia, despite the diplomatic efforts to dampen the atmosphere between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the most prominent of which was the opening of the Iraqi Embassy in Riyadh and the appointment of (Ghanem Al-Jumaili) ambassador of Iraq to Saudi Arabia in 2009, and in 2012, Saudi Arabia appointed (Fahd Al-Zaid) its ambassador to Jordan as a non-

5. The text of the agreement, the website of the general secretariat of the prime minister, is available on the internet, for more see the link www.cabinet.iq

6. Jassim Mohammad Hatem, the Iranian role in the Middle East: Regional variables (Iraq – Syria as a model), Arab Democratic Center, Iranian madarat, issue 4, Germany, June 2019, P. 174

resident ambassador to Iraq, which was warmly welcomed by the Iraqi government⁷ it contributes to the adoption of the option of improving bilateral or even triangular relations. “After 2003, we did not have a clear foreign policy, and even today we still lack a clear vision, and also when talking about the political system after 2003, it does not have a certain vision and the political system is disorganized,” said researcher Mazen al-Zaidi.

The stage of security and balance...

Since the control of the “ISIS” the terrorist organization on Iraqi territory, Iraq’s foreign relations have witnessed a very significant shift, especially with geographically neighboring countries, the most important of which is Iran and Saudi Arabia, for geographical, security and political reasons, and the course of foreign policy has shifted significantly in the adoption of “terrorism diplomacy,” which tried to clarify that the armed forces alone are insufficient to defeat terrorist organizations⁸, unless accompanied by external efforts to enhance international and regional cooperation in countering terrorism by controlling borders, preventing the infiltration of terrorist individuals and reducing the sources of financing for terrorist organizations, and Iran was one of the first countries to announce its cooperation with Iraq in this file, so at 26 September 2015, a quadruple alliance of (Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria) was formed in order to increase the intelligence effort in the war against ISIS, as well as Saudi Arabia, which joined the US-led international coalition to fight ISIS, and at this stage Iraq

7. Al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper, the Iraqi government warmly welcomes the decision of Saudi Arabia to appoint a non-resident ambassador in Baghdad, No. 12139, February 22, 2012

8. Yasser Abdul Hussein, one hundred years of Iraqi foreign policy 1921-2021, Department of General Cultural Affairs, Iraqi Ministry of Culture, Tourism and antiquities, Baghdad, 2021, P.731.

tried to invest the security aspect in its foreign policy and relations with countries, as well as the repercussions of the Iranian nuclear agreement, which made most of the countries in the region rethink the nature of Iranian relations, in this aspect, says Dr. Saad al-Saadi in 2015, when the nuclear agreement between Iran and the United States was signed, a group of Strategic and military experts who were present at some meetings headed by President Obama attended.

They sat down with Saudi experts, and one of the Saudi experts, Ibrahim al-Mari, asked the head of the US delegation, «How would you prefer to cooperate with Iran, which is considered an adversary of yours, taking into account the interests of the six Gulf countries that are your partners?» The head of the delegation replied that the United States would rather deal with a rational adversary than an irrational partner. Of course, this was a strategic shock for Saudi Arabia, which prompted it to rethink its strategic plans and interests in foreign relations and other alliances with the United States, China, Russia, and other countries.

The stage of mass change...

Serious thinking began at the beginning of 2017, especially with the arrival of US President (Trump) to the presidency of the United States, who tried to restore the Saudi-Iraqi relationship to contain Iran and its rival in Iraq. He also tried to redefine Iran's role in the Iraqi arena to the rear, not to expel it, given the difficulty of this process, because of the historical, cultural, and civilizational depth between the two, and there must be an Arab depth in Iraq due to its relationship with the Arab depth and its former Arab status.

Therefore, coordination began for the establishment of the (Coordinating Council for the Development of the Relationship

between Iraq and Saudi Arabia), which formed a close link between Saudi Arabia and Iraq again to consolidate the relationship between the two countries in several respects and common policies between the two countries in terms of borders, trade, reconstruction, counter-terrorism and oil export⁹, so interest in Iraq increased after the Crown Prince (Mohammed bin Salman) took over the leadership in Saudi Arabia, who tried to deal with Iraq through diplomatic channels and two directions, namely¹⁰:

1- Activating the role of the Saudi Embassy in Iraq and dealing with the Iraqi government directly without the need for the mediation of some relative forces.

2-adopting the diplomacy of the second track, which is to get closer to influential Iraqi Shiite figures, as happened with the visit of the Shiite figure Mr. (Ammar al-Hakim) as well as the Shiite figure Mr. “Muqtada al-Sadr”.

This is confirmed by Mrs. Laila Al-Khafaji, who says: “A dramatic change in the Saudi leadership led to improved relations, and there was a development in democracy in Iraq, which made Iraq more mature today. There appears to be qualitative stability and political strength that believes in achieving a strategic balance in regional relations.”

Mediation path...

In talking about the course of mediation, it is important to start with a pivotal and important question, which is why this mediation did

9. Alaa Taleb Khalaf, the future of Iraqi-Saudi relations after ISIS, challenges and opportunities, Journal of International Studies, Center for Strategic Studies, University of Baghdad, No. 72-73, 2018, P.323.

10. Ayad al-Amber, Iraq, and its neighbors and game theory, research published in the Middle East journal, April 22, 2019

not occur in previous years, for example in 2006, 2007, 2008, and in this context, Mr. Haider Al-Mulla confirms, (talking about relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran It is talking about an ideological and ideological conflict, and this conflict has extended since the change of the political regime in Iran after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the events that took place in the region illustrate this, such as the events of the Iran-Iraq War and the Second Gulf War, and the events of the occupation of Iraq in 2003, which made Iraq fertile ground for this conflict), and this indicates that the tripartite relations were not flexible or smooth relations, not only after the Iranian revolution, but extend to even older roots. Since the formation of the Iraqi state, there has been a tense and complex relationship between the two parties, as the border issue was the most prominent problem. In relations with Iran, the problems generated after the formation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, among which was the political approach that led to the complexity of the nature of relations between the two countries¹¹.

This is confirmed by researcher Mazen Al-Zaidi, who says, “It cannot be denied that Saudi-Iraqi relations have been thorny since the royal era, and the documents recently published for previous years contain an American memorandum from Washington to Iraq about Nouri Al-Saeed’s complaint about the interventions and aid provided by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the Communist Party. This is strange.” Because the Iraqi Communist Party at that time was opposed to the Iraqi government),

Likewise, this is confirmed by Dr. Muhammad Al-Ukaili, who says (that from the beginning, the state of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were not comrades, nor were they in harmony with Iraq, and history proves that. I mean, before the establishment of the Iraqi state,

11. Yasser Abdul Hussein, source previously mentioned 142-147.

the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in terms of ideology, sectarianism, and economics, had a different and negative position. With Iraq and Iran), this confirms that the course of relations has changed greatly between the parties over periods, the nature of the changing events after 2003 and that Iraq was the strongest and most prominent element in changing the nature and form of relations between third parties, which made Iraq an arena for settling scores and regional competition. Political, economic, and ideological.

However, this situation did not prevent Iraq from making many diplomatic efforts in dialogue and communication to correct the course of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and in this regard, Undersecretary Omar Al-Barzanji says, “The Iraqi government is pursuing the path of supporting and encouraging dialogue in the region in a way that enhances peace and stability in the region and to be Baghdad is a starting point for rapprochement and reconciliation between countries, not an arena for settling scores and proxy war. Iraq’s commitment to balance in relations between Tehran and Riyadh constitutes a basic rule that is important to follow in our foreign policy. Iraq’s geographical location next to both Saudi Arabia and Iran will make them view Iraq as a barrier and a competitive field).

Therefore, Iraq tried to adopt diplomacy of “interests and ideology” in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as Al-Barzanji says (the issue of interests is necessary, and we have interests and our interest is that the relationship be good between all parties, and our interest is that the relations between the parties are good and stable. From The second aspect is that we live in a time of dialogue and acceptance of others, the issue of people’s differences in any issues is considered a matter of privacy, and we do not place ourselves in the position of divine rule. We leave this matter to the Creator when we disagree

among ourselves. On the other hand, Iraqi diplomacy lacks identity and the nature of The changes that occurred in the region took a positive direction, but I see that there are also areas of tension, and what is happening in Gaza makes it clear that there will be no relations and arrangements without understanding in the region, and the issue of the Saudi-Iranian conflict has moved from the stage of the Cold War to the stage of truce, but is it clear in the features? The horizon is that the situation will move to the stage of strategic relations and express the ideological conflict?.

Despite this, Iraq played a pivotal role in the events of Iranian-Saudi relations, after a rupture that lasted seven years, through Baghdad hosting dialogue rounds to bring the views between the two parties closer, as negotiations between Riyadh and Tehran began in April 2021, under Iraqi sponsorship and in an unannounced meeting. Between the delegations of the two countries in the Green Zone in Baghdad, and from April 2021 to April 2022, Baghdad hosted five rounds of talks between officials of the two countries, and Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to end the state of diplomatic estrangement between them, after mediations and rounds of secret and public talks hosted by Iraq and Oman. This led the two sides to an agreement that prepared the political ground for the return of normal relations between Riyadh and Tehran so that the agreement and its terms could later be announced in China, which entered as a supporter and guarantor of what was known as the Saudi-Iranian agreement.

Iraq and the future of the Saudi-Iranian agreement...

Talking about the future of the agreement, as well as the shape of the relationship between Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, puts us before a very important question: Did the agreement achieve any gains? In this

context, Dr. says: Saad Haqqi Tawfiq, the Saudi–Iranian agreement at the beginning of 2023 achieved positive gains for the region and Iraq, which are as follows: _

1. The agreement leads to transforming relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran into peaceful ones, which in turn will reflect positively on stability in the region, and this will be in the interest of Iraq in terms of internal stability.

2. The transformation of relations between the two countries into peaceful ones will lead to opening horizons for cooperation between the countries of the region.

3. The agreement will increase regional cooperation opportunities, especially between Iran and the Arab Gulf states.

4. Iraq will benefit from this agreement as the level of Saudi presence in it will increase, and Iraqi – Saudi cooperation will expand to include some areas such as energy, trade and investment.

5. The agreement will strengthen the Iraqi government at home.

6. The agreement will increase confidence in the Iraqi government among the GCC countries.

7. The confirmation of the agreement on the need for Iran to stop supporting the armed factions in Iraq, which will exempt Saudi Arabia from supporting some parties and political forces in Iraq, and will go to deal with the Iraqi government directly.

8. The Saudi–Iranian understanding will facilitate similar understandings in Yemen, Lebanon and Syria.

Iraq and the investment agreement...

Iraq has many opportunities to invest in the agreement in terms of security, economic, political, and other factors that benefit Iraq and the region, as Barzanji says: in this context, Iraq can exploit this Saudi-Iranian agreement to its advantage through the following

_ The kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran are influential regional countries, and they are the fulcrum of the security of the Gulf region, and any conflict or conflict between them reflects negatively on the region, as does the rapprochement and agreement between them on the security situation. Politics in the region in general and Iraq in particular. The agreement could therefore ease political and security tensions in Iraq. The mediation dialogues in Baghdad between Saudi Arabia and Iran highlighted the role of Iraq in the regional political aspect as a sponsor of dialogue, rapprochement and pacification, and not an arena for settling scores.

_ On the other hand, the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement contributes to increasing investment opportunities inside Iraq, as it will serve as a message to investors about the decline of the circle of risks and tensions, and stability is one of the factors attracting investment, as the kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of the countries that have announced their desire to invest in Iraq, as Almarai Company has already offered extensive land reclamation in the Samawa desert and also in the development of border ports with Iraq, as the kingdom has maintained and built the Arar port and has a desire to open other ports.

- Economic gains, as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq are countries rich in oil and Natural Resources, and this rapprochement and agreement can be invested to serve the unification of oil policies and exchange opportunities for exchanging experiences, investments and developing

energies to serve the interests of all.

How successful the agreement was...

The success of the agreement and its continuation, which may have positive effects on Iraq, requires several things, and this is confirmed by Dr. Saad Haqi Tawfiq, who points out the need for a set of factors to ensure the success of the agreement

1. The success of the agreement will depend on the development of the regional political situation in the region, especially the development of the war in Gaza.
2. The issue of normalization with the Israeli entity and its impact on Saudi-Iranian relations.
3. The positions of major countries and external interventions.
4. The impact of the role of Arab countries.
5. The need for an institutional structure and guarantor states to follow the developments of the agreement, and Iraq can contribute to this framework.
6. Work to enhance confidence between the two countries by increasing trade cooperation between them, and Iraq can contribute to the steps required to strengthen and restore confidence between the two countries.

Barzanji also emphasizes that establishing a balance in relations between Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia requires several things, including

- Discuss with Riyadh and Tehran the possibility of establishing an Iraqi-Saudi-Iranian coordination council to maintain and manage

relations and coordinate positions between the parties to this vital triangle in the region.

- On the other hand, the Iraqi government encourages the pursuit of popular diplomacy between Iraq, the Kingdom, and Iran, as it can have a major role in rapprochement, such as holding sports tournaments and cultural festivals, for example, what Basra city has achieved by hosting the 25th Gulf Cup football tournament.

- Since Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are all suffering from climate change, as Iran tops the global ranking in the index of countries with the worst air quality, Baghdad ranks 24th and Riyadh ranks 75th among the Middle Eastern countries in the issue of air pollution, it is appropriate that there is great cooperation between the concerned authorities on addressing climate and environmental changes in a way that reflects positively on the parties concerned.

I believe that the occasional development routes from East to West and vice versa will force the opposites in the region and its vicinity, which makes their interests in Iraq, and that Iraq is rising and planning economically and has regional and international projects, which makes it a mediator in any issue with the remaining countries).

The relationship between the three countries was not distinguished by a good history of bilateral or tripartite relations, and until now, the two poles (Saudi Arabia, Iran) still suffer from an important dilemma that forms the axis of the relationship between the two, as well as the level of regional extension, namely (the security dilemma), and the events of the war in Gaza clearly show this, despite the continuation of the course of the agreement and relations between the parties, but this has not erased mutual fear and concern from both parties, especially from Iran, because of the close link between them and the armed

resistance factions, which entered the arena of war and conflict clearly, which portends an escalation of the pace of events are happening rapidly, which makes the process of regional stability achieved In the light of the earlier agreement will be further threatened, at the security level, political, as well as economic – Iraq is not far from the events in the region, not from a political, security or economic point of view, but Iraq has the ability to be a mediator in solutions and be part of the solution, not the crisis, investing the state of Iraqi internal stability, as well as international and regional support operations for the government of Mohammed Shia Sudanese, through which he can put forward a solution initiative, including two important aspects (economically and security), however, this there is a need for maturity in the Iraqi vision on strategic issues The internal and external conditions of Iraq, as well as the availability of the conditions of the guarantor party in Iraq in order to be able to achieve this.

A brief biography of the names given in the paper:

1- Omar Barzanji: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Multilateral Affairs and legal undersecretary of the ministry.

2- Haider Al-Mullah: a Sunni Iraqi politician, a deputy in the Iraqi parliament for the third session.

3- Leila al-Khafaji: Iraqi politician, official of international relations and international organizations, coordinator of the Political Bureau of the National Wisdom current, and a deputy in the first session of the Iraqi parliament.

4- Dr.Saad haqi Tawfiq is an experienced professor of international relations, with numerous publications in international relations and Iraqi foreign policy, and a professor of International Studies at the AL-

Amlin Institute for graduate studies.

5- Mazen al-Zaidi: writer and political journalist accused of religious criticism and political thought.

6- Dr. Saad al-Saadi is a professor of strategy and International Studies at the Faculty of Political Science/University of Baghdad and has numerous publications in the field of Iraqi foreign policy.

7- Dr. Mohammed Al-Akili: assistant director of the Al-Nahrain Center for Strategic Studies at the Iraqi National Security Advisory.