Iraqi Shi‘i leader Muqtada al-Sadr’s July 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia is evidence of a paradigmatic shift in Saudi policy. Aware that the Shi‘a comprise the majority in Iraq, the kingdom appears to be abandoning its previous sectarian stance and is reaching out to the Shi‘a population there. The Saudis have thus made use of anti-Iranian sentiments within the Shi‘i Arab community of Iraq. Although these efforts will not eliminate Iranian influence in Iran, they will curb it to some extent. This rapprochement with the Iraqi Shi‘a is also part of Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Salman’s attempts to adopt wide-scale reforms.

SUNNI-SHI‘I RESET

Saudi Arabia seems to have completely overhauled and reset policy vis-a-vis Iraq. This inevitable shift in policy has taken place much to the dismay of Iran. The visit of Iraqi Shi‘i leader Muqtada Sadr to Saudi Arabia in July 2017 was not only an unpleasant surprise for Tehran but also a symbol of a paradigmatic shift in Saudi foreign policy.

Hitherto, Saudi Arabia espoused a sectarian domestic and foreign policy. The Saudis naturally supported the oppressed Sunnis of Iraq just as they continue to be vehemently hostile to Saudi Shi‘a in the province of Qatif. Yet as Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman increases his influence, one can feel the wind of change blowing in every direction—from the role of women in Saudi society to Sunni-Shi‘a relations. Aware of the fact that the Shi‘a comprise the majority of Arabs in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have come to understand that a sectarian policy would inevitably be counterproductive. Iraq remains an important Arab country for the Saudis, and the KSA is eager to extract it from the orbit of Iran’s influence.

SADR’S IMPROMPTU VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA

Muqtada Sadr’s summer 2017 visit to Riyadh created an uproar in Iran. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Bahram Qassemi reacted by commenting that Iraq was an independent country that did not require Iranian approval for a visit abroad by one of its leaders. Clearly this was only a formal diplomatic response, as the media in Iran revealed how the Islamic republic really felt about al-Sadr’s visit. Kayhan, the Supreme leader’s mouthpiece, accused Sadr of having “sold himself to Al Saud.” Of course Iran has accused Saudi Arabia of supporting the Islamic State and has blamed it for the instability in Iraq. Last, Iran advised Muqtada to stay away from politics and to gain more experience.

For the Saudis and the UAE, Muqtada Sadr is an ideal ally. Despite his impressive Shi‘i clerical pedigree, al-Sadr is not a religious authority. Still, he is undoubtedly a powerful informal leader for many Iraqi Shi‘a. Most important for the Saudis is Sadr’s staunch opposition to Iran and Iranian influence; his clear stance against sectarian hatred is no less important to them. Sadr has always positioned himself as an Iraqi Arab leader who remains above the fray of the murderous sectarian feud, and he has refused to send his people to fight in Syria on behalf of Iran. As a result, his loyal forces have suffered from a financial deficit. The financial factor may well have influenced al-Sadr’s
decision to turn to the Sunni Saudis, who are ready to sponsor his militia in exchange for their anti-
Iranian stance.

In early August 2017, al-Sadr made some statements that further fueled Iran’s growing fear. Sadr urged Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi to “integrate the disciplined PMF (the Popular Mobilization Forces, al-Hashd al-Sha’abi) members into the Armed Forces, seize the arsenal of PMF fractions, and keep weapons exclusively in the hands of the state.”\(^5\) This demand was, however, immediately rejected by PMF Spokesman Ahmad al-Asadi and the prime minister, both of whom argue that the PMF is already part of the Iraqi Armed Forces.\(^5\) Though this conglomerate of militias was created ad hoc in response to Ayatollah Sistani’s fatwa to fight the Islamic State, the PMF is Iranian-backed, trained, and sponsored. Sadr has equally urged the Iraqis to fight corruption and implement reforms.

All this annoys Iran, because Sadr has a genuine base of support within Iraq’s Shi’i community, and this has obstructed Iranian efforts in Iraq. As for officials in Baghdad, even pro-Iranian Iraqi politicians have not openly criticized Sadr for his pro-Sunni moves. In fact, they have been trying to woo Tehran. To “counterbalance” Sadr’s visit to Saudi Arabia, Iraqi Interior Minister Qasim al-A’araji traveled to Tehran, where he announced that Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman had requested that Iraq serve as a mediator between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran.\(^6\) A’araji added that the Saudis had promised to take care of Iranian pilgrims to Mecca—particularly important following the tragic stampede in Mecca in 2016, which claimed the lives of several hundred Iranian pilgrims.

Riyadh, however, has officially denied these rumors, claiming it never asked for Iraqi mediation to improve its relations with Tehran. Nonetheless, some Western media outlets have pointed to these moves as signs of an imminent Saudi-Iranian thaw.\(^8\) Moreover, Iranian FM Muhammad Javad Zarif reportedly had a friendly conversation with his Saudi counterpart Adel al-Jubeyr at the summit of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul.

The present author argues that this optimism is baseless. The KSA and the Islamic Republic of Iran could theoretically engage in some “reset” only on the proviso of finding common ground in Syria and Yemen. As of the writing of this article, however, this is impossible and should be ruled out, as the Saudis and Iranians not only have conflicting interests in Yemen and Syria but also open political and ideological hostility. In addition, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have also been involved in the “Cold War” with Qatar, while Iran has unequivocally aligned with Qatar. This too decreases the plausibility of mediation efforts between the two rivals.\(^9\) Iraqi policymakers are well aware of the unlikelihood of an Iranian-Saudi reconciliation; their motives are thus not to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran but rather to reshape Iraqi policy following the demise of the Islamic State (IS). Absent the threat of the Islamic State, which led to close cooperation with Tehran—Iraq now wishes to adopt a more multi-vector policy that would not rely exclusively on Iran. Another point to consider is that Qasim al-A’araji is not only the minister of interior but also a formal head of the PMF and close to Iran (and is rumored to be Qasim Suleimani’s man), which makes the claim that the Saudis asked him to mediate even less plausible.

Saudi and Emirati overtures towards Iraq have not been confined to visits of Iraqi Shi’i officials, although the importance of such visits should not be underestimated. The Iraqi Oil Minister Jabar Luaibi visited Saudi Arabia and to discuss "ways to strengthen and develop bilateral relations between the two brotherly countries, especially in the field of oil and gas, in a way that serves their common interests.”\(^10\) Saudi Arabia has formed a joint coordination council with Iraq to improve trade relations and overall ties between the two neighboring states. Saudi Trade Minister Majid bin Abdullah al-Qasabi expressed the desire to increase cooperation with Iraq on all levels and added that new council would bolster trade between the two countries. The Saudis are also planning various reconstruction building projects in Iraq and to open a consulate in Najaf, which is a sacred site for the Shi’a and one of the most important centers of Shi’i learning.\(^11\)
Sadr has already visited not only Saudi Arabia but also the UAE. Abu Dhabi has offered Iraq the similar joint projects as Saudi Arabia with the same goal—to curb Iranian influence and adopt a non-sectarian policy. Many voices in the Arab world see the Emirati policy as closely coordinated with Saudi Arabia, which is seen by some as an example whereby united action by Arab states renders a policy more effective. Indeed, despite obvious conflicting interests in Yemen, the Saudis and Emiratis appear to be coordinated in Iraq since they are pursuing the same goals. This coordination is not simply theoretical on the level of common interests, and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and Shaykh Muhammad bin Zayid of the UAE talk frequently and have the same agenda. For the UAE, like Saudi Arabia, the rift with Qatar is no less important than the efforts to prevent Iranian hegemony in the region.

Ammar al-Hakim, who is also a very important Shi’i figure in Iraq, is expected to visit Saudi Arabia in the near future.12 Al-Hakim was the president of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the leading Shi’i force in Iraq, until he announced his defection in a televised address on July 24, 2017. He went on to found the National Wisdom Movement, which he said "will support all patriotic and free Iraqis" beyond the Sunni-Shi’a rift, "to work together on preserving the unity of Iraq and the secret to our power, which is based on our diversity."13

A SAUDI-EMIRATI PLAN?

Iranians are wary of Sadr al-Hakim’s maneuvering. Their fears are well grounded and go far beyond their skepticism about his ties with the Wahhabi regime, their staunch enemy. Another factor, evident to any Arabic and Persian speaker, is that while Saudi Arabia’s true motives may be crystal clear, when they are wrapped in peaceful, anti-sectarian, and constructive verbiage, Iran cannot publicly object to them. Last, Iran cannot afford public lashing out at Saudi Arabia because of the latter’s efforts to curb Iranian influence in Iraq, which would be tantamount to a public acknowledgment of Iran’s malicious role in Iraq.

Iran logically assumes that though the PMF is a formidable military force, it does not encompass all the Shi’i forces in Iraq. By contrast, many popular factions on the ground are aligned with Sadr and al-Hakim. With the Islamic State out of the picture, one can object to the PMF without the fear of being accused of complicity with jihadists. While neither Sadr, al-Hakim, nor their respective militias will disband the PMF and expel the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisers from Iraq, as Saudi Arabia is demanding, they have the ability to create a counterbalance to prevent Iran from subjugating Iraq. Nameh news—the Iranian website linked to Sadeq Larijani, who heads Iran’s judicial system—asserts that Saudi Arabia has developed a joint political program with Sadr and al-Hakim.14 In the run up to the 2018 elections, Sadr could create a coalition to curb the influence of the PMF and Iran. This goal could be achieved by means of an alliance between anti-Iranian Shi’a—like Sadr, al-Hakim, Iyad Alawi, and even Prime Minister Haydar al—and prominent Sunni politicians, such as Usama Najafi and Salim Jabbouri. In this context, Saudi plans to reopen the consulate in Najaf are neither surprising nor fortuitous. This is also in line with the Saudi intention to impede Iranian efforts. The theological seminary (hawzah) in Najaf and the hawzah in the Iranian city of Qom have always had a complicated relationship.

The roots of these tensions lie in the struggle for prestige between the Iraqi Arabs and Persian Ulama (doctors of law). These complicated dynamics existed long before the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. These tensions have become even more pronounced since the Ulama in Najaf are not only unsympathetic to Iranians in general, but they oppose the Khomeinist doctrine of vilayat-e faqih (Guardianship of the jurist).15 Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the most important Iraqi religious authority, also rejects vilayat-e faqih, albeit he is of Iranian descent and a Persian speaker. The rejection of vilayat-e faqih does not translate into a theorectic scholastic theology but rather challenges Iranian involvement in Iraq and opposition to Supreme Leader Ali Khamene’i.
That said, patience will be required of the Saudis if they wish to see their plans succeed. Iranian influence in Iraq can be curbed but not eliminated. Iran dominates nearly everything in Iraq, from building projects to airways. Iranian intelligence has penetrated Iraq’s political parties, security forces, and media. Neither Muqtada nor a larger anti-Iranian coalition would be able to prevent Iran from using Iraq as a logistical gateway to Syria.

The conflict within Shi’i communities is being skillfully exploited by Saudi Arabia; as the Saudis can officially draw a line of distinction between the respected “Ja’fari school of Muslim law” and hostile Khomeinist heresy, which is casted as both non-Shi’i and non-Arab. The Saudi stance is parallel to the Iraqi nationalist stance that distinguishes between respectful Iraqi Sunnis and Islamic State jihadists. Similarly, Sadr granted an interview to the international Saudi-sponsored journal al-Sharq al-Awsat in which he praised Saudi efforts to fight terrorism and described the KSA as no less than a “father” who deals with his sons with love and justice.

NATIONALISM IS ALIVE AND KICKING

In summary, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are betting on the burgeoning Iraqi nationalism of Shi’a Arabs and have adjusted their policies accordingly. The unfolding events in the Gulf have also led to several conclusions regarding the current state of ideology and religion in the Middle East. The opening toward the Shi’a is first and foremost about politics as opposed to theological rapprochement. Analyst and Consul General of France in Jeddah Louis Blin has predicted numerous vectors of Saudi domestic and foreign politics. One of the most important conclusions is that the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia should be seen as geopolitical and not sectarian. Saudi policy has been unfolding against the backdrop of the American retreat. Thus, the Gulf countries are trying to become more active in order to defend themselves from Iran. Naturally, Saudi Arabia is aware of all these factors, including the sectarian aspect. Saudi policy is thus strategic and not “Wahhabi.”

The Iraqi Shi’a are first of all Iraqis and Arabs before being Shi’a. While their theoretical theological proximity to Iran may, therefore, exist, it will never come before or at the expense of their Arab identity. However, they also do not intend to fight Iran alongside the Saudis either. The approach of the Saudis and the UAE is pragmatic and clever; it is focused on the bringing Iraq back into the “Arab family.” While this would annoy Iran, the idea is widely supported among Iraqi Shi’a and Sunna. Nationalism and local identity remain a very strong factor, at least as strong as political Islam. While there were predictions of an eventual waning of national identities and their subjugation to political Islam, they have turned out to be premature at best.

In fact, history has shown that nationalism has always been a powerful force in the modern Middle East, particularly in Iran and Iraq. The reality belied the hopes of both Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini with the eruption of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. Khomeini logically expected Iraqi Shi’a to rise up against the tyrant Saddam, whereas the Iraqi dictator no less logically assumed that the Iranian Arabs of Khuzestan would join the Arab cause of Iraq. In the end, the Iraqi Shi’a fought Iran shoulder to shoulder with their Sunni brethren in arms while the Iranian Arabs fought the Iraqi aggression as actively as their Farsi and Azeri speaking compatriots.

The rapprochement with Iraqi Shi’as can be seen not only as the result of a pragmatic geopolitical calculus but also as a step that fits the general vision of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and possibly his Emirati allies. The prince is determined to carry out sweeping reforms to reshape Saudi Arabia and decrease the kingdom’s dependence on hydrocarbons, thus contributing to the modernization of Saudi society. The kingdom possesses the financial means to carry out such reforms. Unlike previous reformers in the Muslim world, however, bin Salman also a very skillful politician and is aware that one cannot impose modernity from the top. He realizes the impediments standing in the way of reforms within Saudi society. One is the religious establishment, which bestows legitimacy on the kingdom, just as the princes enable the Wahhabi establishment’s
monopoly of orthopraxy and orthodoxy. The kingdom and the religious establishment thus have a symbiotic relationship, and the former cannot afford to alienate the latter. The Saudi leadership thus won’t impose modernization by force, unlike former Muslim rulers—including reformers such as Atatürk and the Iranian Shahs (Reza Shah and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi). Forced modernization did not turn out well, as the examples of modern Turkey and Iran show.

Unfortunately, the issues of women’s rights and attitudes toward the Shi’i minority are the most problematic and the most sensitive from the perspective of the Wahhabi (Hanbali) school of Muslim law. On the other hand, Saudi authorities are fully aware that Saudi youth—including women—are eager for more opportunities, and they are demanding opening to the world. The prince appears to have adopted a flexible but complicated solution on this matter. First, changes have been gradual and voluntary, unlike similar attempts in other Muslim countries in the past. Second, the Saudi authorities smartly abstain from defining reforms as an ideological shift. Rather, the need for reforms is explained as an economic indispensability, which seems to make sense against the backdrop of the falling price of oil. More and more women, therefore, are entering the workforce, and the Saudi authorities have been working to build more entertainment facilities geared for the youth. As the relationship between the religious establishment and the government is reciprocal, the former usually consents (by issuing appropriate fatwas) to some government actions that may initially seem to contradict Shari’a law—for example, military assistance from infidels or women empowerment. Since the actions are defined as maslaha (in the general interest of Islam in the longterm), they are considered perfectly Islamic. Not only will successful reforms and changes in Saudi society modernize the kingdom in the longrun, but they will also strengthen the country in the international arena. Iran’s anti-Saudi propaganda would thus prove ineffective. In light of this, it is possible that the reset with Iraq is not only an ad hoc measure but also an integral part of Saudi reforms.

In conclusion, Iran is not omnipotent, and its outreach to Iraq has limits. The Saudi goal to curb Iranian influence also coincides with similar Israeli goals. If the Saudi and Emirati strategy consists of opposing Iran by ending the sectarian feud, then this is a classic case of political pragmatism overlapping with moral imperative. Israel can only welcome such a political turn and hope for its success.

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NOTES

13 Ibid.
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