

Will Iraq's PM Embrace a Trump-Inspired Saudi-Sponsored Drive to Curb Iranian Influence?

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With ISIL reeling in the decisive battle to recapture Mosul – ISIL's biggest urban stronghold –, Masoud Barzani president of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) declared, on June 7, that the KRG would hold an independence referendum on Sept 25. Although, Barzani's announcement sent shock waves across the region, but what made it profoundly alarming was his determination to conduct the controversial referendum in Kirkuk – an oil-rich multi-ethnic city – and other disputed areas, which were seized by the Kurdish fighters (Peshmerga) as the Iraqi Army unraveled in the face of ISIL's lightning advance in Jun 2014.

And while Iran swiftly declared its strident opposition to the referendum, Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al Abadi initial response was muted. Turkey's president Erdogan by contrast, scathingly criticised Barzani's move. This was highly unexpected, since Turkey has consistently enabled the KRG to defy the Iraqi Central Government (ICG) by selling oil independently.

Even with Turkey and Iran standing by the ICG, Abadi nevertheless turned to the US to resolve this contentious issue. Washington has all along sought to persuade Barzani to postpone the referendum, arguing that it would deflect attention from fighting ISIL. However, the offensive by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) on Aug 20, to recapture Tal Afar, without any Peshmerga participation, demonstrated that battling ISIL superseded all other priorities. In essence, the US's chief objection was essentially the timing of the referendum – only a few months before the parliamentary elections due in May 2018 –, which would undoubtedly torpedo Abadi's prospects of being re-elected, as his premiership would be inextricably linked to surrendering Kirkuk. Barzani's rejection on Sept 14, of an international proposal, prompted the US special envoy for the war on ISIL Brett McGurk, to explicitly emphasize that the referendum lacked any international legitimacy.



Masoud Barzani (Source: [The Kurdish Project](#))

Consequently, Barzani vowed to press ahead with the vote, prompting Saudi Arabia, a close ally of Barzani, to dispatch on Sept 17, its Gulf affairs Minister Thamer al Sabhan, who appealed to Barzani to back down. In the eyes of Riyadh, Barzani has doubtlessly been playing an instrumental role in not merely destabilizing its arch foe Iran by enticing Iran's Kurds to rise up, but also encouraging Turkey's Kurds to severely undermine Turkey's government which has emphatically backed its arch rival Qatar in the face of a tight blockade it has imposed in partnership with UAE, Bahrain and Egypt.

On Sept 21, ICG ordered the ISF including the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMFs) – consisting of mainly Shia paramilitary units and volunteers, who spearheaded Iraq's fight back against ISIL – to launch an offensive to not only retake Hawija – a strategic ISIL bastion –, but also to send a stark warning to Barzani.

Buoyed by US and Saudi ringing endorsement, Abadi demanded on Sept 24, that the KRG must hand over airports and border crossings to ICG and also halt oil export. Even though, Barzani's independence vote was overwhelmingly backed, but on Sept 29 it was abundantly clear that it has spectacularly backfired, when all international flights ceased and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson underlined that the US rejected it.

While Iran and its allies in Iraq and Syria were gaining the upper hand against ISIL, came Trump's desperate attempt to turn the tables on Tehran by refusing on Oct 13, to re-certify the nuclear deal, claiming disingenuously that Iran was violating the spirit of the 2015 accord. Iran, fired back by defiantly showcasing its significant influence, sending to Sulaymaniyah – in Kurdistan – on Oct 15, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Qasem Soleimani, who utilised his close ties with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leadership – especially Bafel Talabani –, practically securing the withdrawal of PUK Peshmerga units and enabling ISF not only to sweep effortlessly into Kirkuk on Oct 16, but also the remaining disputed areas. Paradoxically however, the collapse of Barzani's independence dream – thanks undeniably to Iran – has been exploited by Trump and Riyadh to bolster Abadi's inherently weak leadership by presenting him as Iraq's National hero who crushed ISIL and foiled Kurdish independence.

Ever since 2003 when the US toppled Iraq's ruthless dictator Saddam Hussain, Saudi Arabia has not only adamantly refused to recognize Iraq's fledgling democracy but has been working tirelessly to derail the political process.



Former PM of Iraq, Nouri al-Maliki (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Against this backdrop, Obama's administration sought to assuage Riyadh's distrust by compelling Iraq's ex-PM Nuri al-Maliki - who is deeply loathed by Riyadh - to step aside, despite winning the 2014 election, in favour of Abadi. Riyadh however, only appointed al Sabhan as its first ambassador to Iraq in Dec 2015. And in a stunning speech in Jul 2016, from Washington, Iraq's Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafri - who was well-connected to the Saudis during the nineties through his business of organising and acting as a religious guide for Iraqi Haj pilgrims in London - expressed his resounding shock at Riyadh's relentless efforts to destabilise Iraq, acknowledging that Baghdad has persistently been covering up Riyadh's subversive activities. So, clearly Baghdad's expulsion of al Sabhan in Aug 2016 was an act of last resort.

Trump's victory in the US presidential elections was beyond doubt, music to King Salman's and his - young inexperienced - son's Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) ears. He has fervently embraced Riyadh's uncompromising stance: By considering Iran's nuclear agreement as the worse deal ever and pledging to scrap it. Additionally, regarding Iran's growing influence as the primary threat to the region, while also supporting Riyadh's vociferous yet unsuccessful campaign - given the growing chorus of highly credible US and European leaders, including ex-President Obama, ex-Secretary of State Clinton and ex-Vice President Biden, all of whom have firmly pointed the finger of blame at Saudi Arabia for funding, arming and exporting its extremist hard-line Wahhabi Salafi ideology to terrorist groups, such as ISIL, Al Qaida and Jabhet Al-Nusra - to shift the responsibility for instability and insecurity to Iran.

Although, Trump initially treated Abadi as Obama's poodle, but apparently had a major change of heart, largely due to not only intense lobbying by Tillerson and the defence secretary James Mattis, but also Abadi's tacit support - as revealed by Trump's readout of his phone conversation with Abadi in Feb 2017 - to Trump's quest to tackle Iran's threat. This clearly laid the foundations for a new strategy spearheaded by Trump and Sponsored by MBS, aiming to prop up Abadi's powerbase, - ahead of the May 2018 elections - ultimately empowering him to steer Iraq away from Tehran and towards Riyadh.

Yet ironically, Trump-MBS strategy has relied heavily on weaning Iraqi Shia blocs off Iran and pushing them towards Riyadh, thereby inevitably creating a Shia-dominated bloc that is ostensibly led by Abadi but in reality controlled and employed by Riyadh to combat Shia blocs aligning with Iran. To implement this strategy Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubier arrived in Baghdad in Feb 2017, and Abadi was invited to meet Salman in Jun 2017, opening the door for Iraq's Interior Minister Qasim al-Araji - who is a leading figure in Badr Organisation, which is part of the PMFs - followed by Moqtada al Sadr - who is a highly influential cleric and head of the al-Ahrar bloc - to converge on Riyadh in Jul 2017.

Trump, has sought to shore up the new strategy by first sending McGurk in Aug 2017, to attend the reopening of the Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and then Tillerson on Oct 21, to join Salman and Abadi in Riyadh for the inauguration of the Saudi-Iraqi cooperation Council. Without doubt, Tillerson's demand - while in Riyadh - that the PMFs should go back home, was intended to consolidate MBS's credentials as guardian of Sunni Islam, while also boosting Abadi's image by allowing him to slam Tillerson's remarks in a face to face meeting - the next day - in Baghdad.

So far Trump-MBS strategy has not made any significant headway, suffering its first major setback in Aug 2017, when al-Araji revealed - from Tehran - that MBS had asked him and also Abadi to mediate to ease tensions with Iran. MBS had to make a stark choice, either losing face or spoiling the perfect pretext used by Iraqi Shia leaders to justify their eagerness to visit Riyadh. Of course MBS denied making such a request.

And while Riyadh would prefer to trumpet Sadr's bloc alliance with Ayad Allawi's al-Wataniya coalition, which was announced in Jun 2017, as tangible evidence that its strategy is delivering, in fact it was merely an agreement to coordinate positions in parliament. Surely, Riyadh must be disappointed that Ammar Al-Hakim, who is now leading his new Al-Hakema movement after ditching in Jul 2017, leadership of the pro-Iran Islamic Supreme Council, has so far been reluctant to openly edge closer towards Riyadh. And again, Sadr's declaration on Nov 21, that he strongly supports Abadi's bid for a second term is definitely not inspired by Riyadh, but instead driven by Sadr's implacable obsession with blocking Maliki's prospects of becoming PM. It is also in retaliation for Iran's full-blown backing to his arch rival Qasi al-Khazali - head of Asaib Ahl al Haq.

Trump-MBS strategy constitutes a major turn around in the US outlook for post-2003 Iraq, shifting the emphasis from constructing a fragmented Iraq that could potentially break up to a more united Iraq under the leadership of Abadi, who is not merely heavily dependent on its support, but also prepared to bend backwards to tow its line on Iran. In this context, Barzani became an obstacle and Kirkuk a mere detail.

Indeed, Abadi's declaration on Dec 9, the end of war against ISIL signals the beginning of the elections campaign. But with MBS engaged in an escalating anti-Shia confrontation against Iran and its allies, it is very hard to imagine how Shia leaders - such as al-Sadr and al-Hakim - could join a coalition hell-bent on taking the fight to Tehran.

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