



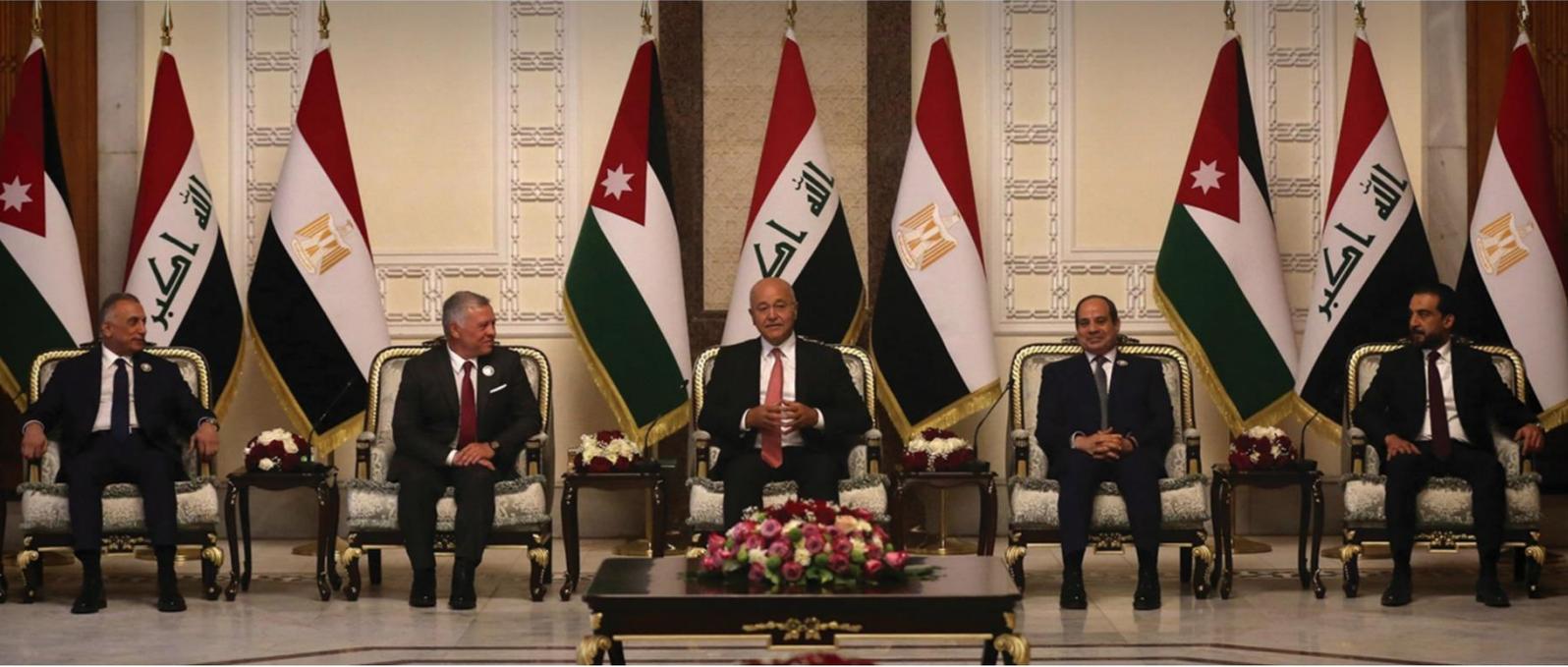
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Hassan Saab



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TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org

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The future of Egyptian-Iraqi relations

Hassan Saab

The Egyptian-Iraqi relations have steadily developed in recent years. In fact, there are several factors that may push the relations between Egyptians and Iraqis forward or sometimes backward.

However, it is expected that the Egyptian-Iraqi relations will further develop in the future, depending on their current context, based on the challenges or threats that push the Egyptian and Iraqi regimes to full coordination between them (as well as with other Arab countries) to face them.

Within the positive factors, one can enumerate: the Arab national and Islamic identity of the Egyptian and Iraqi peoples; the modern and contemporary history of the two countries, given the fact that they face similar transformations and situations; and the common interests that unite the two Arab countries, in the economic, commercial and cultural fields, as well as the military and security fields, with their local and strategic dimensions.

However, there are other factors that may negatively affect the relationship between Egypt and Iraq, most notably the corruption that is deeply rooted in the administrations and institutions of the two countries, the sectarian factor, and the external competition, both at the Arab and foreign levels, to gain political and security influence in the two countries - and huge investments in the case of Iraq, under the pretext of reconstruction after the devastating wars that the country has suffered over the past decades.

This path, in particular, includes active regional states, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and the Israeli entity; as well as foreign countries with global influence, such as the United States and the Russian Federation, and economically powerful Western countries, such as France, Britain, and Germany.

This paper handles the possible repercussions of the negative extraneous factors on the course of the growing relations between Egypt and Iraq, where they are more influential than the positive natural factors in this regard. Most prominent among these factors are:

- The corruption and bureaucracy factor,

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- The sectarian factor, and
- The external/influential factor.

Since these factors are intertwined with each other and have varying influence, as it is the case in relations with other Arab countries than Iraq and Egypt, they will be discussed in the same context, without separating them or arranging them according to their influence.

The remarkable political and diplomatic activity between the Egyptian and Iraqi regimes in recent years highlights a qualitative development in the relationship between the two countries, despite the serious instability they have faced amid several intertwined and similar causes and circumstances.

The current Egyptian regime under Sisi is seeking to seize the "historic opportunity" available for deepening and expanding Cairo's relations with Baghdad that is facing difficult political, military, security and economic conditions, amid persistent political failure to form a comprehensive and coherent national government. This political failure, whether before and after the legislative elections that have recently been held, comes as a result of widespread corruption in the joints of state institutions and beyond, as well as the rooting of the sectarian factor (with its negative dimension) within the basic components of Iraqi society, even among followers of the same sect (Shia in particular), not to mention the influence of the nationalist factor (Arabs and Kurds), which escalated after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, in addition to the other fragmenting factors that occupation succeeded in activating since then until today.

To be clearer, Egypt aims to develop its relations with Iraq, at this sensitive stage in its history, through focusing on benefiting from the cheap and good-quality Iraqi oil (to replace Saudi oil), and fully engaging in the reconstruction and building operations of Iraq, which Egyptian contracting and construction companies consider a "rich source" for making profits and reaping huge money, specifically in infrastructure projects, electrical interconnection (where Iraqis suffer from constant power failures), and development of land and air transportation; as well as education, health, agriculture, trade and others, that have terribly deteriorated due to the repercussions of the US invasion of Iraq and the failed government policies that ran the country after it.

This path is undoubtedly a natural path for any relationship between two countries that share geography, history, religion and nationalism. However, objective remarks or questions may arise about the natural context of development of the "special" relationship between Egypt and Iraq, especially after the coercive or violent change that affected the two Arab countries years ago, albeit fundamentally being different circumstances, tools and consequences of the change in each of them.

First: Did the Iraqis choose between the Egyptian offers for the reconstruction of Iraq or the development of inter-relations in various fields and other offers presented by other countries that may have been less expensive and of more quality, such as China, Russia, Iran and others, which do not hide their enormous capabilities and advanced and diverse experiences? Or: have the narrow considerations and calculations of influential parties or personalities ultimately imposed themselves on the scene, which embodies the state of rampant corruption in both countries: Egypt and Iraq, together.

Accordingly, it is possible to explain why many agreements, signed between Iraq and the above countries (China, Russia and Iran) in recent years, were cancelled, frozen or obstructed, some of which were of a strategic nature, in the fields of electric power, oil, reconstruction, agriculture, trade exchange and others, where the political dimension was also there (such as practice of pressure by the U.S. and European Union).

Second: with respect to the political dimension specifically, which includes the sectarian or the doctrinal factor, the agreement announced between the Egyptians and Iraqis included reconstruction of the Iraqi "Sunni" governorates (Nineveh, Salah al-Din, Anbar and Samarra), without any competition from other companies, according to an official Iraqi source.

This clearly indicates the influence path established by the Egyptians in Iraq, through the Sunni environment in which (large segments of the population) are still distancing themselves from the Shiite "tyrannical" reality in the country, demographically, politically and socially, since the post-US invasion period in 2003 until today. It is known that this environment, which had previously lost its ruling pillar (Saddam Hussein), automatically responds to any Arab influence attempts, whether hostile or competitive with Iran (and the Shiites), with the aim of restoring some of the Shiite-Sunni balance in the country.

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Third: In the same context, it is possible to explain the growing influence of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and even Turkey, within the Iraqi Sunni environment, since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, all the way to the emergence of takfiri groups, and then demise of their star several years ago.

These countries are currently seeking, through aid, loans, or the investment projects that they have provided to the Iraqi government, or that are under implementation, especially in the so-called Sunni areas, to establish or consolidate their political, economic and security influence, to boost their vital interests or to dismiss their concerns about Shiite "dominance". In addition, there is the influence of Iran, which has now possessed significant pillars in Iraq, other than the Popular Mobilization (Hashd Shaabi) and other militant groups loyal to it. This is what Egypt is doing today more than any other Arab country that has good relations with Iraq.

Fourth: With respect to the so-called New Levant Project, which brings together Iraq, Egypt and Jordan in what looks like an economic union, and it may include politics and security later. However, it is worthwhile to carefully consider why this project is limited to only three Arab countries, without including Syria, Lebanon, Palestine... and Turkey in it, according to what was stated in the original proposal submitted by the World Bank in 2004, only one year after the American invasion of Iraq.

It is clear that political considerations, related to the three countries and other Arab and foreign countries (perhaps Saudi Arabia and the United States are at the forefront) that support the policies of these countries, have forced the launch of the project by the three countries, after a long delay or obstruction, noting that participation of the above countries was necessarily required to start strongly and achieve its pre-set "strategic" goals.

Egypt implicitly has reservations about Turkey's participation in such an economic union, while the United States and Saudi Arabia refuse to involve Syria, Lebanon and Palestine in the New Levant Project, being under the control or influence of forces hostile to them, as they are backed by Iran, the archenemy of the American-Gulf axis in the region, while Iraq does not have an audible opinion in this scene.

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The success of any Arab economic union or bloc, including three or more countries, requires removal of political or factional considerations first. Also, it requires resistance to financial pressures or temptations, the external ones in particular, which is missing in the New Sham Project.

However, it is expected that the political will, economic motives, and common security challenges will enhance Egyptian-Iraqi relations in the future, to serve the interests of the two countries and peoples, as recurrently stated by officials of the two countries, and as evidenced by the growing agreements signed by them.

Expansion of cooperation, coordination and inter-accords and collective agreements between the various Arab countries, especially the neighboring ones that face similar political, economic and security crises, remains the safest option for all countries in the region, if there is a real will to achieve the interests and aspirations of their peoples in freedom, security and justice, away from the policies of imposition, coercion, domination and dependency on regional or foreign countries (mainly the United States) seeking to achieve their own goals and objectives¹.

¹ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies