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The Baghdad Summit: Iraq's Return to the Arab Fold?

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Last week the Arab League summit conference convened in Baghdad for the first time since May 1990, just a little more than two months prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and his cadre worked overtime on the political, diplomatic, and security fronts to ensure that the summit would in fact be held, and without incident. Iraqi leaders across the spectrum hailed the gathering as a critical milestone that marks independent Iraq's return to normalcy. For them, the summit served as a powerful symbol of Iraq's rehabilitation and reintegration in the Arab world. But did the summit in fact inaugurate Iraq's return to the Arab fold? Beyond the embarrassing low-level representation of most states at the summit, Maliki's scramble to contain Iraq's internal strife and repair relations with Arab states showcased the manifold obstacles that continue to stand in Iraq's way.

Iraq, a founding member of the Arab League, has been largely ostracized by the organization since its aggression against Kuwait, and even in the post-Saddam era, relations with the League and its members have proved difficult to mend. Arab leaders have generally snubbed Iraq's Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari (an ethnic Kurd) at collective Arab gatherings. In their view, the legitimacy of Iraq's Shi'i and Kurdish-led government – formed by occupying forces and influenced by Iran – is, at the very least, questionable, as the domination of outside powers undermines Iraqi sovereignty. For their part, many Iraqis dismiss the Arab League as a hypocritical and impotent Sunni club that has always been indifferent to atrocities committed in Iraq and regard the organization's unprecedented activist streak as a dangerous invitation for another disastrous foreign intervention in the region. Nevertheless, Iraq successfully persisted in its bid to host the summit, which was originally scheduled for March 2011, but was postponed due to the

upheavals cascading across the region. The Baghdad summit took place despite *al-Qa'ida* affiliates' coordinated attacks across major Iraqi cities and behind-the-scenes Saudi efforts to derail the meeting. Even as delegations landed in Baghdad, former National Security Advisor Muwafaq Baqir al-Ruba'i warned that some of Iraq's Arab brothers were conspiring to create a crisis and delay the summit once again. Against such odds, Iraqi politicians and officials repeatedly declared that the very fact of convening the summit in Baghdad constituted a success, irrespective of its resolutions and decisions.

Iraqi leaders of all stripes – from Kurdish MPs to leading figures such as Grand Ayatollahs 'Ali al-Sistani and Sheikh Bashir al-Najafi – attributed profound significance to the summit. Many called for a united front as Iraq acted to reclaim its 'rightful' and 'natural' 'avant-garde' role in the region. Some proudly identified Iraq as a leading model for Arab democratic transitions, while others boasted that the 1991 uprisings against Saddam Husayn pioneered the current wave of Arab revolts and transformations. Officials hoped that beyond its symbolic weight, the summit would bolster regional and international confidence in Iraq and promote investment in the economy.

Columnists echoed these sentiments and reaffirmed Iraq's commitment to its Arab identity. An editorial in *al-Manara*, a Basra newspaper (from the Shi'i south of Iraq), expressed hope for Iraqi-Arab rapprochement and asserted that the media was responsible for poisoning the atmosphere between Iraq and its neighbors. It explained that Iraq cannot alienate Iran due to their shared border and economic ties, but insisted that this relationship does not detract from Iraq's Arabism. Editorials from Gulf newspapers also voiced a desire to end the estrangement and have Iraq 'return to its [Arab] roots.'

Baghdad's aspiration to return to the Arab embrace and reemerge as a regional player compelled Maliki to moderate Iraq's position on Syria and restore relations with Arab states. In the past months, Iraq resumed diplomatic ties with Libya and concluded a deal with Egypt on remittances to Egyptian workers who fled during the 1991 Gulf War. More importantly, Maliki repaired relations with Kuwait during a critical official visit prior to the summit that ended with a \$500 million deal to resolve wartime debts and discuss Kuwait's controversial Mubarak Port project. This historic progress was reflected in the Kuwaiti Emir's attendance of the Baghdad summit, as well as the Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister's remark that holding the summit in Baghdad was the correct choice. Otherwise, however, the level of participation – a litmus test of Arab acceptance of the 'new Iraq' – was weak.

Gulf monarchs were conspicuously absent, mainly because Iraq's campaign for détente with Saudi Arabia has been less successful. Saudi Arabia had initially pressured Arab states to boycott the summit and the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Sa'ud al-Faysal publicly conditioned his country's participation on the elimination of the "sectarian environment" in Iraq, warning that Gulf states would not send high-level dignitaries in protest of Iraqi Shi'i parties' interference in Gulf affairs. He was referring in particular to the leader of the Sadrist trend, Muqtada al-Sadr, whose followers have burned Saudi and Bahraini flags at demonstrations against Saudi complicity in the

repression of Bahrain's Shi'is. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia named an official envoy to Iraq for the first time since the Gulf War, its Shura Council invited Iraqi Speaker of Parliament Usama al-Nujaifi for an official visit, and the two countries signed a prisoner exchange agreement ahead of the summit.

Iraq's reticent stance on the year-long uprising in Syria has been a source of tension between Baghdad and Riyadh. For many Arab leaders, Iraq's abstentions from the Arab League resolutions on punitive measures against Syria were clear proof that Iraq's government is beholden to Iranian interests and opposed to those of the United States, Turkey and Gulf countries, all of whom have worked to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Though Iraqi politicians have insisted that the Syrian crisis constitutes a matter of vital national security because of its potential to reignite violent sectarian conflict in Iraq and its deleterious economic effects, many Arab leaders continue to regard the Maliki government as an Iranian proxy. This perception was reinforced by leaked emails that exposed Syrian advisors' discussion of a military aid corridor from Iran to Syria, a strategy that took Iraqi cooperation for granted. Maliki distanced himself from Iraq's initial position and denied reports that Iraq facilitates Iranian aid to Syria. Prior to the summit, the Iraqi government lined up with the Arab consensus supporting the internationalization of the Syrian conflict, but still rejects active military support for the Syrian opposition, as advocated by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

In addition to the customary items of Arab economic cooperation and the Palestinian file, the gathering produced an official statement urging the Syrian government and opposition factions to adhere to Kofi Annan's proposal for a UN-supervised ceasefire involving the withdrawal of soldiers and heavy weapons from Syrian cities and the initiation of a serious national dialogue. Previous Arab League resolutions had called for Asad to step down, only to be vetoed by Russia and China when they were brought for endorsement to the U.N. Security Council. The Baghdad summit's softer approach marked a recognition of collective Arab limitations, as well as a desire to maintain a minimal Arab consensus, one that would include Iraq.

As Arab leaders were finalizing the statement, Iraqi parties were preparing for a serious national dialogue of their own, meant to mitigate the domestic political fissures that have deepened since the December 2011 U.S. withdrawal. Political brinkmanship erupted when Maliki made brazen moves against two of Iraq's most senior Sunni politicians who have supported a greater degree of federalism and criticized Maliki's centralizing and increasingly authoritarian rule. A politically motivated arrest warrant issued for Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi provoked the indignation of Iraq's Sunni neighbors and former Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad 'Allawi's 'Iraqiya faction, which temporarily boycotted parliament.

This impasse led to calls to hold a national conference to implement the January 2011 Erbil Agreement governing the terms of oil exports from the Kurdish region. Many MPs complain that this agreement, which was brokered by Kurdistan Regional President Mas'ud Barzani and was the basis of the power-sharing arrangement for Maliki's government, has been blatantly disregarded. Iraqi MPs sparred over whether the conference should be held

prior to the Arab League summit, and when the demand to do so was ignored, 'Iraqiya MPs lobbied for the inclusion of Iraq's domestic problems in the summit agenda.

Just before Arab dignitaries assembled, Barzani delivered a scathing public criticism of Maliki, and the Kurdish Bloc joined the ultimately unsuccessful effort to discuss Iraq's domestic crisis at the summit. Politicians and editorials warned of 'the day after the summit', portending an escalation in internal conflict. Indeed, just as the summit ended, VP Hashemi fled Iraqi Kurdistan where he had taken refuge in December, for Qatar. Qatari officials, who have condemned Maliki for sidelining Iraq's Sunni populations, refused to comply with Maliki's request for Hashemi's extradition. Maliki now must contend with this flare-up and the specter of shifting political alliances at a time when Iraq's intra-sectarian splits are also at a high.

The Arab League summit was an important step for Iraq and a personal achievement for Maliki, but ultimately, Baghdad's ability to formulate balanced positions on regional developments and maneuver between the Iranian-Saudi rivalry will determine the pace at which Iraq can return to the Arab fold. Had Saudi Arabia truly been eager for this to happen, it would have dispatched a higher-level representative to the summit. The snub reinforced what many Iraqi already think: Saudi Arabia and other Sunni monarchs will not countenance Iraqi Shi'is' right to their newfound power. For now, the Baghdad summit only has illustrated that Maliki is an astute politician in a troubled region, and that Iraq's standing in the Arab firmament remains anomalous.

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