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Post-ISIS Geo-political Spins in the Middle East

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While it's true that ISIS is almost out of the door, still there's new challenges for the region looming on the horizon.

It had become quite obvious, even long before the end-game of ISIS had reached its culmination, that the post-Daesh era would see new geo-political alignments taking place on a scale that would necessitate burying earlier hostilities and forging new alliances. This is perhaps the most striking and defining element of power politics that dynamics of power-tussle are never static, but change across the time and space continuum. No surprises as such happen in power-politics when 'old enemies' sit together and decide to confront the 'new enemies.' As such, while Daesh has almost been defeated, the cardinal reasons that had led to the germination of Daesh and other groups have still not sunk. Saudi Arabia is as hostile to Iran as it ever was, and to counter Iran's increasing influence in the post-Daesh scenario, the kingdom has now started to approach, trying

to recruit, Shi'ite elements in its bid to counter-balance Iranian influence in Iraq (and Syria). Iran, on the other hand, is also in the middle of strengthening its relations with one of its historical rivals in the region: Turkey.

The House of Saud sowing its own seeds in Iraq

This is happening almost simultaneously with Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, meeting Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of Sadr movement who was on first ever visit to Saudia in last 11 years, in Jeddah few weeks ago. Let's not forget that it was only a year ago when Al-Sadr was involved in protests against the kingdom's embassy in Baghdad for the execution of a key Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, when Al-Sadr was protesting the execution, he was also calling for the resignation of Syria's Assad, indicating his willingness to tap into the Saudi block. It was, therefore, no surprise to see him travelling to UAE few days ago where he met UAE's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan—someone who is allegedly the main architect of Gulf crisis and Qatar blockade, and is also widely regarded as Muhammad Bin Salman's mentor and chief ally.

It is quite obvious that Saudi Arabia is cultivating Al-Sadr to penetrate in the “post-war Iraq” through post-war reconstruction funds. Sadr's office said in the post-meeting statement that Riyadh had agreed to pay Baghdad \$10 million purportedly as aid to rebuild Iraq. Members of Al-Sadr's movement were also awarded special hajj visas for this year.

Within Iraq, Al-Sadr's political orientations are anti-regime. Al-Sadr is very critical of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government. It was in March that he had started a sit-in inside Baghdad's Green Zone to force the government to enact certain “reforms.” It was, therefore, again not a surprise to see him, right after visiting Saudi Arabia, demanding that the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi had to either “integrate into the army the disciplined members” of the Hashd al-Sha'abi forces or put them under severe government control. Sadr had also called on Iraqi authorities to “seize the arsenal of all armed groups,” without elaborating further. It is not difficult to understand that Saudia Arabia's is using Al-Sadr to force the Iraqi government to clip Iran's wings of influence in Iraq, where pro-Iranian forces have played a central role in defeating ISIS.

Besides it, by offering to “strengthen Arab Shiite authority” in Iraq through al-Sadr, the House of Saud seems to be pushing him to become Iraq's next Prime Minister in the next general elections, due to be held in 2018. Will this happen or not is one thing. What, however, is obvious here is that a Saudi political game is in play and is beginning to leave its impact on Iraq. The objective is obvious: the House of Saud wants to make al-Sadr ‘Saudia's chosen man’ in Iraq to reverse Iranian influence out of the region. This, however, is unlikely to happen. For one thing, cultivating al-Sadr might not be so easy as it may seem at this point. Secondly, even if this eventually becomes possible, reversing Iran's influence from the region seems even more unlikely. Iran's own manoeuvres indicate that the country is not only sensing Riyadh's games, but also moving towards strengthening its own position by cultivating relations with its historical rival in the region, Turkey, opening new vistas of co-operation and strategic alliance.

Iran mends its Turkish connection

This way, Tehran seems to think, Iran can counteract the extent to which Riyadh can damage Iran through Iraq. Their bond is likely to be initially based upon curtailing the Kurdish influence in the region (Iraq and Syria)—something that would then not only increase Iran's influence in Iraq, enabling it to align itself more deeply with Iraq's Shi'ite elements, but also enable it to turn its relations with Turkey into a regional strategic alliance at some future stage.

The reason why Iran and Turkey are coming closer on the Kurdish question is not merely Turkey's rivalry with Kurdish factions; it is also due to the fact that Kurdish outfits are potential US allies in both Syria and Iraq and source of trouble for Tehran too. Therefore, if Kurdish position can be weakened by extending co-operation to Turkey, not only would, in Tehran's calculation, Iran's position gain strength in Iraq and Syria, but Iran would also have a powerful regional country on its side. Turkish-Iranian co-operation in the on-going Gulf crisis is also one example where their interests have converged, culminating in the recent visit of Iran's top military brass to Ankara, the first visit of its kind since 1979.

On his last visit to Iran few months ago, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reaffirmed Turkey's determination to increase trade with Iran to US\$30 billion annually, saying Ankara saw no obstacle to increasing cooperation with Tehran. It is gradually becoming clear that the increasing closeness of these two players would create a strong political, security and economic bloc in the Middle East in the coming years. With Russia continually mediating between the two and providing them with building blocks of enhanced co-operation, there remains little doubt that regional politics in the post-Daesh era would be dominated by these powers.

It is also clear that the House of Saud and its allies would continue to vie for power and influence. A lot, however, depends upon the extent to which the House of Saud can cultivate Shi'ite elements in Iraq and Kurds in Syria to force the balance of power to tilt towards them.