

Iraq's Regional Awakening

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Brief Analysis

Iraq is evincing growing confidence and ambition to use its political experience as a regional model for countries emerging from dictatorships.

After eight years of looking only inward, Iraq is finally looking beyond its borders. Iraq has so far endorsed the changes in Tunisia and Egypt, but speaking up only after the change in government in Tunisia and offering only rhetorical support to the Egyptian demonstrations eight days before Mubarak stepped down. In a surprising contrast, it had a more active reaction to the events unfolding in Bahrain and Libya. To be sure, Iraq's position has varied from one situation to the other, but the common thread has been that the popular and governmental reactions indicate Iraq's confidence and ambition to use its political experience as a regional model for countries emerging from dictatorships.

In regard to Libya, Iraq's government has thrown its complete weight behind the international community's efforts to enforce a no-fly zone and its efforts to "protect the Libyan people...and prevent any oppressive practices by the Qadhafi regime against its own people," according to a statement issued on March 21.

In contrast, Baghdad's reaction to the events in Bahrain are more telling about how Iraq views its future role in the region. In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Peninsula Shield Force deployment to Bahrain, there was immediate condemnation from major Iraqi Shia groups and figures, including Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr. Additionally, on March 16, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stated that the Saudi Arabian and UAE deployment to Bahrain will "complicate the situation...and might lead to agitating sectarian violence." Finally, the Council of Representatives session on March 17 witnessed a debate that included members calling for Iraq to play a role in mediating the tensions, allocation of five million dollars to assist the people of Bahrain, suspension of diplomatic relations and the expulsion of Bahrain's ambassador to Iraq, and calls for protests in support of the Bahraini people. And, indeed, protests took place in several Iraqi cities in which the situation in Bahrain was described as genocide and the deployment as a foreign invasion, with Saudi Arabia receiving strong criticism.

To an extent, the popular protests provided a respite for the Iraqi government, which has been struggling to deal with the public's recent demands to provide better services. The demonstrations also offered Iraqis a channel to assert their voice in the political debate. Although a cross-sectarian group of Iraqi politicians denounced the GCC's force deployment, the Iraqi Shia political class saw this moment as an opportunity to express solidarity with the Bahraini Shia. The desire to show transitional Shia solidarity has proven to be even more important for the Najaf-based Iraqi Shia's religious establishment, the *marjaia*. The *marjaia*, which competes with Iran's Qom as the center of Shia learning, reportedly refused to meet with Bahrain's counsel in Najaf, who was seeking its help in mediating the sectarian tensions in Bahrain. The *marjaia* likely saw the events as an opportunity to be a support base for the Bahraini Shia, many of whom follow Najaf's preeminent ayatollah, Ali al-Sistani. The government's swift response is also the result of the long-running animosity between Prime Minister Maliki and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

The only step that carried a risk for Iraq was its response to the demonstrations in Egypt. In recent years, Mubarak's Egypt has been open about embracing the post-2003 Iraq. Iraq certainly took a gamble by taking the Egyptian people's side before Mubarak was forced out. The same cannot be said with regard to supporting the Libyan people against Muammar Qadhafi, as Qadhafi has had strained relations with the Iraqi government since 2003. It remains to be seen how the Iraqi Shia politicians will react if pro-democracy protests take place in neighboring Iran. Many of those politicians consider Iran an ally. Finally, if Iraq envisions itself as a regional role model for an open society and open political system, its credibility will be on the line if it does not set the example at home by ensuring complete freedom of assembly for the Iraqi people.

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