



USIPeace Briefing

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For more information:
info@usip.org

Syria's Relations with Iraq

This is the fourth in a series of USIPeace Briefings on Syria published by the Institute's Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention.¹ Written by Mona Yacoubian, director of the Institute's Syria Working Group and special adviser to the Muslim World Initiative, it is based on discussions at a recent seminar held at the Institute. The views expressed do not reflect those of the Institute which does not take policy positions.

Stepped-up regional diplomacy initiatives on Iraq have brought new attention to the role Iraq's neighbors might play in easing the conflict. A March 10 conference in Baghdad brought regional powers, including Syria and Iran, together with American and Western diplomats. The Baghdad meeting, the most significant diplomatic gathering in Iraq since 1990, and the first U.S.-Iranian encounter since November 2004, led to the formation of three working groups on security, refugees, and energy. A follow-on foreign minister's meeting is currently slated to take place later this month in Istanbul.

In advance of the April ministerial, a non-official dialogue between Iraqis and their neighbors (including Syrians) produced the Marmara Declaration, a 36-point action plan for developing a regional peace process for Iraq. As the tempo of diplomacy gains momentum, there is renewed focus on Syrian-Iraqi ties and whether Syria can help bring stability to Iraq.

Main Points:

- Syria's alleged "blind eye" to the funneling of insurgents and arms across its border into Iraq is a key issue dividing the two countries. Nonetheless, even if Syria were to offer full cooperation and completely stanch the flow of fighters and weapons, the overall impact on Iraq's security situation would be relatively marginal since the underlying dynamic propelling Iraq's violence is largely internal.
- While the flow of insurgents from Syria into Iraq has garnered significant attention, the flow of refugees from Iraq into Syria could exert a far more destabilizing impact. The continuous flow of Iraqi refugees into Syria—currently estimated to surpass one million—has triggered widespread inflation and severely strained

¹ Other USIPeace Briefings in the series are: Syria and Political Change, December 2005 (http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2005/1212_syria.html); Syria and Political Change II, March 2006 (http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/0301_syria.html); and Syria's Role in Lebanon, November 2006 (http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/1109_syria_lebanon.html).

Syria's already insufficient public services and infrastructure, amid growing Syrian resentment.

- Both countries' decision to resume diplomatic ties in November 2006 after a break of nearly 25 years underscores their shared strategic interest in a cohesive and stable Iraq. While Syria has deep ties with all of Iraq's key political players—Shiite, Sunni, and Kurd—Damascus remains wary of Iraqi sectarianism (particularly Kurdish separatism) and likely would prefer an authoritarian government run by a strongman in Baghdad—albeit one willing to engage with Syria on mutually agreed terms.
- Syria will likely continue to engage in various regional diplomatic initiatives, in the hopes of staving off any additional refugee flows, seeking greater assistance in dealing with its current refugee population, and ensuring that a stable—ideally authoritarian—government favorable to Damascus takes hold in Iraq.

Iraq's Insurgent Gateway?

Syria's failure to prevent Sunni fighters from infiltrating across its 450-mile border with Iraq is the most contentious issue dividing the two countries. While Syria strongly denies allegations that it is allowing its border to serve as an insurgent gateway, both the Iraqi and U.S. governments accuse Damascus of not doing enough to prevent the flow of insurgents, fighters, and financing into Iraq. Furthermore, Syria—a longstanding host to Iraqi dissidents—continues to harbor Iraqi Ba'athist officials, reportedly allowing them to organize meetings and engage in other political activities.

Insurgents crossing into Iraq from Syria generally fall into two categories: 1) pro-al-Qaeda jihadists transiting from the Gulf; and 2) former Iraqi Ba'athists and other Iraqi Sunni elements. The Syrians have a shared interest in preventing al-Qaeda elements from gaining momentum in Iraq, and have reportedly arrested up to 2,000 suspected jihadists. In the past, they have provided low-level intelligence cooperation on al-Qaeda insurgents to both Iraqi and U.S. intelligence services. However, Damascus has not been helpful in preventing insurgents from crossing into Iraq. Gulf Arabs do not require a visa to enter Syria, and they provide a source of foreign exchange to the strapped Syrian economy. To date, Syria has not undertaken serious measures to monitor foreigners arriving in Syria from the Gulf. As for Iraqi Ba'athist elements residing in Syria, Damascus maintains that they are not involved in the insurgency.

Last December, Syria and Iraq signed a security cooperation agreement, but Syrian measures, primarily implemented before the agreement, remain largely limited to creating additional border posts and building a four-meter high earthen berm. For its part, the Syrian government emphasizes the difficulties inherent in patrolling the long, porous border, and has asked for greater assistance in safeguarding the border. For example, it has made requests to both the United States and Britain for night vision equipment.

While the magnitude of the insurgent threat emanating from Syria is difficult to gauge, a February 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq judged that external actors would not likely be a "major driver of violence." Indeed, the brunt of Iraqi violence appears to be driven by internal factors. Thus, even if Damascus provides full cooperation in preventing insurgent and arms traffic across its border, the overall impact on Iraq's conflict, while positive, would not significantly improve Iraq's internal stability.

An Emerging Refugee Crisis

Although the insurgent issue has long dominated discussions on Syria's role in Iraq, the increasing flow of Iraqi refugees into Syria may have a far more destabilizing effect. Over the past two years, Iraqi refugees streaming into Syria have increased sharply, swelling the population by more than six percent. Current estimates of Iraqi refugees in Syria range between 1.2 and 1.4 million, with an estimated 40,000 new refugees arriving monthly, nearly double the rate of only a few months ago.

With few prospects of legal jobs, the refugees are placing increased pressures on Syria's subsidized economy, as the country's worn infrastructure and overburdened public services are forced to meet even greater demands. Skyrocketing rents, rising prices, and overcrowded schools are testing the limits of Damascene hospitality. Last month, al-Baath, the Syrian official daily, reported that 75,000 Iraqi students had enrolled in Syrian schools, resulting in as many as 60 students crowded into a classroom. Syria's worsening refugee crisis even prompted Washington to break its two-year boycott on high-level visits to Damascus. In mid-March, it dispatched Assistant Secretary of State for Refugee Affairs Ellen Sauerbrey to accompany a delegation led by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to discuss the crisis with the Syrians.

The UN High Commission for Refugees is now warning that its resources have been stretched to capacity, and that it may be forced to establish refugee camps within the borders of Iraq's neighbors, including Syria. Described by a UN official as the "biggest movement [of displaced people] in the Middle East since the 1948 Palestinian crisis," Iraq's refugee crisis could significantly undermine Syrian internal stability. As Damascus attempts to cope with its mounting refugee crisis, continued strains on the country's public services and infrastructure could reach a breaking point and lead to public unrest.

Seeking a Strongman in Baghdad

Unlike Iran, Syria remains a relatively marginal player in Iraq. Nonetheless, Damascus has embarked on a concerted strategy to cultivate relations with key Iraqi political players across ethnic and sectarian lines. In particular, Syria has exploited its longstanding ties to key Iraqi government figures, many of whom sought refuge in Syria during Saddam's regime. For example, Iraq's Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki lived in Syria for 20 years, while Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, spent several years in Syria and even held a Syrian passport until 2004. By some estimates, 17 of the 25 top leaders of the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—at one time a key Iraqi opposition group and now a major player in the governing coalition—lived in Syria. Syria's ties to key elements in Iraq's Sunni community are also well-established.

Syrian diplomacy, crowned last November by the re-establishment of bilateral relations and in January by the first state visit of an Iraqi president to Syria in nearly 30 years, seeks to promote Damascus's strategic interests amidst Iraq's continuing violence. Syria initially favored the "managed chaos" that characterized Iraq in the several months following the U.S. invasion because it kept U.S. troops "pinned down" and therefore unlikely to invade Syria. Moreover, Iraqi chaos provided a powerful argument against Syrian reformers demanding democratic change.

However, the past year's dramatic escalation in sectarian violence, coupled with fears of Iraq's potential disintegration, has impelled Syria to seek greater stability in Iraq. In particular, Damascus has signaled its displeasure with Iraqi Kurdish autonomy, which has emboldened Syria's Kurdish population, estimated at 1.7 million. Dubbed the "Kurdish Intifada," a series of violent protests in 2004-05 among Syria's increasingly restive Kurdish community prompted a harsh crackdown by Syrian authorities.

With the costs of Iraq's chaos—massive refugee flows and heightened sectarianism—outweighing its short-term benefits, Syria will do what it can to help restore a measure of stability in Iraq. In the short-term, Damascus may improve security and intelligence cooperation with Baghdad. It will also seek additional international aid and support for its growing Iraqi refugee population. In the longer term, should Iraq manage to emerge intact from its crisis, Syria would clearly favor the establishment of an authoritarian government in Baghdad. Specifically, Damascus would seek an Iraqi strongman who could keep violence in check, prevent the establishment of a breakaway Iraqi Kurdistan, and stifle genuine political opening.

About the Author:

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