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Baghdad's Wary Support for the Syrian Status Quo

Summary

- Iraq's reaction to the popular uprising in Syria is mostly determined by the chaos its Shiite-led government believes would follow the sudden collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime.
- Baghdad possesses limited ability to influence the course of events in Syria, but is using this to provide modest support to the Assad regime.
- The fractured and sectarian nature of Iraqi politics, however, militates against Baghdad developing a decisive position on the way forward in Syria.

Baghdad Worried About Spillover

The starting point for understanding how Iraq's Shiite-led government evaluates the popular unrest in Syria is its wariness towards the uncertainties associated with a change in the secular, Alawite-dominated regime in Damascus. Especially given the historic rivalry between the two countries and their repeated interventions in each other's politics, the gradual improvement in bilateral relations over recent years is one of Iraq's few foreign policy bright spots. Indeed, following encouragement from Iran, Assad played a role in brokering a second term in office for Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki late last year.

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Baghdad's new rulers believe that the United States is underestimating the possible dangers associated with a sudden ouster of Assad, including sectarian conflict in Syria or the emergence of a Sunni Islamist political order in Damascus. They believe that either outcome could have a profoundly destabilizing effect on Iraq's still fragile politics (or tilt the balance of power away from its current leading players). These concerns are buttressed by threats from some members of the Assad regime's inner circle that Syria will not "suffer alone" from instability,[1] with Iraq seen as one place where retaliation could occur.

On the security front, with U.S. troops departing and Iraqi Security Forces not yet fully capable of policing the country's borders, Iraqi officials are also concerned about the ramifications of sustained unrest in Syria for their country's internal stability. This is because Syria was the main springboard for weapons and foreign fighters entering Iraq during the latter's descent into sectarian conflict after 2003. More recently, the biggest exception to the warming in Syrian-Iraqi relations came in 2009 when Maliki publicly fingered Ba'athist exiles sheltering in Syria as responsible for a series of devastating truck bombings in the Iraqi capital.

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Notwithstanding these attacks, since 2007-2008 the Syrian regime has generally acted to restrict the flow of jihadists into Iraq through increasing cooperation with Iraqi intelligence services and, in some cases, even directly with the U.S. military. Now that Damascus has accused the U.S. of fomenting insurrection against it, this cooperation may be reversed. In this scenario, if Syrian forces are distracted by unrest, or if the country descends into full scale civil war, Baghdad worries that its porous desert border with Syria could once again become a major supply route for foreign fighters and arms.

Finally, trade and particularly the import of Syrian goods into Iraq have been disrupted by the unrest. However, economic relations between Iraq and Syria are not as important to Baghdad as trade with Iran and Turkey. Iraqi trade with Syria was estimated to be $900 million in 2009 (as compared to $5 -$6 billion per year with both Iran and Turkey), with most imports consisting of agricultural and light industrial commodities. Iraqi exports to Syria meanwhile consist of energy products, primarily crude oil, and have been less affected by recent border closures by Damascus as they are considered essential to the Syrian economy.[2]

Modest Influence and Modest Support

The Iraqi government has taken a cautious approach towards the unrest in Syria, betraying a clear bias towards stability over popular Syrian demands.

This policy has attracted widespread international commentary regarding Iranian influence over Baghdad's foreign policy.[3] But the Iraqi government has independent interests in the status quo and few immediate gains from regime change. This is not to discount Iranian influence in Baghdad, but to note that the relationship is complex, and only one of several factors determining Iraqi policy toward Syria. While many Iraqi leaders do desire good ties with Iran, they also wish to avoid becoming beholden to Tehran as the U.S. military departs Iraq. Paradoxically, some in Baghdad believe that the downfall of Assad could increase the likelihood of this by causing Iran to "double down" on its interests in Iraq and the broader Gulf region.

In any case, Baghdad's direct influence over the situation in Syria is relatively limited. Iraq is still in a state of internal flux and its military is unable to project power externally. Iraq's only real hard option to affect the situation in Syria would be to reverse the flow of militants over the last decade and send weapons and supplies over the border to support Syrian protestors. Tribal ties and smuggling networks mean this is happening to some extent on a local level, but it is not state policy. Baghdad in fact likely perceives a shared interest with Damascus in limiting this cross-border tribal activity. The Iraqi government is nervous about the prospect of increased linkages between Saudi Arabia, a new Sunni political order in Syria, and Sunni Arab tribes in western Iraq.[4] This is especially the case since groups like the Shammar tribal confederation span all three countries and because some of Iraq's senior Sunni Arab politicians have hinted at the formation of an autonomous Sunni federal region in western Iraq. The Iraqi government now appears to be coordinating with their Syrian counterparts in managing the border, including closing a UNHCR camp set up to receive Syrian refugees and withdrawing Iraqi citizenship from tribal families purportedly of Syrian descent living along the border.[5]

The other arena in which the Iraqi government brings modest influence to bear is in the economic realm. Iraq is the biggest destination for Syrian exports (19% of their total) and a key source of energy imports for Damascus. In July, Iraq and Syria pledged to work together to strengthen their long-term trade relationship, including repairing an oil pipeline and build a new gas pipeline that would allow Iranian gas exports to reach Syria via Iraq. These steps may provide a boost to Damascus but are not game changers able to alter the trajectory of events in Syria. Nevertheless,

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by continuing to host Syrian trade and diplomatic delegations, Baghdad has signaled support for the Assad regime when Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states have recalled their ambassadors, and regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League have criticized the ongoing violence.

In this sense, the economic relationship is probably of greater strategic significance to the embattled Syrian regime than it is to Iraq. This could become even more the case should additional sanctions be placed on Syria. In another potential role reversal, Damascus might look to its porous border with Iraq as way to skirt sanctions (as Saddam Hussein used Syria to subvert UN sanctions prior to 2003).

Internal Debate and Discomfort

Just as there is no single unified Iraqi foreign policy, it would be a mistake to ascribe a single Iraqi point of view towards the complex events in Syria. This is especially the case as long as the organizing principle of Iraqi politics is the competition between Maliki's State of Law and Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyya coalitions and the strong overlay of regional and sectarian interests which they represent.

Leading Shiite figures, such as Maliki and Muqtada al-Sadr, have been hesitant to directly criticize the Assad regime and have implied that an overthrow of the Syrian "pillar of resistance" will benefit Israeli and other external interests in the region. In contrast, Osama Najaefi, the senior-most Sunni official in government, has said straightforwardly that the Assad government is suppressing the freedoms of the Syrian people and that it is unacceptable to use violence to put down protests. Iraqi Kurdish leaders meanwhile have welcomed recent developments, believing that Syria has been the supply line for the vast majority of terrorist attacks in northern Iraq and that short term instability is outweighed by the benefits of regime change. They have, however, been cautious in their public statements, and counseled Syrian Kurds to be strategic about not providing Damascus with the opportunity to paint developments as anything other than a nationalist uprising.

The reality of the Iraqi response, however, is more complex than simple sectarian politics. Syria is not Bahrain, where the various Iraqi political blocs lined up with stark symbolic positions on the controversial Saudi-led military intervention in the tiny, Shiite majority island's protests. Developments in Bahrain had little potential to directly affect Iraq's political stability and security. This is not the case with Syria, with its size, regional heft and geographic proximity to Iraq.

There is also a degree of solidarity among the Iraqi public with Syrian protestors that the Iraqi government must balance. Local newspaper editorials and some Shiite political figures have expressed moral disappointment with the Iraqi government's weak support for the Syrian people.[6] Some in Maliki's own Da`wa party have privately expressed discomfort with government policy based on the perceived parallels between the current violent suppression of Syrian protests and their own struggle against the Iraqi Ba`ath. These realities have necessitated a more nuanced government position on Syria. Maliki has recently tempered his support for Assad and intermittent labeling of protestors as rioters by urging Syria to accelerate reforms. One of his closest advisors recently went as far as to say that Iraq is against dictatorship and one-party rule in Syria. But when it comes to how the Syrian system can be reformed, the adviser said that the Iraqi government has a different view from the U.S. because there is no way to guarantee that Assad's departure does not create chaos in Syria, and, ultimately, for its next-door neighbor.[7]

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About This Brief

This Peace Brief is part of a series examining the regional dimensions of Syria's popular uprising. The Institute invited leading experts from the U.S. and across the Middle East to identify key vectors of influence Syria's neighbors are bringing to bear on the conflict; to forecast how the on-going conflict in Syria will affect the delicate and volatile regional balance of power; and to examine how the Syrian opposition and the Syria regime are factoring in regional and cross-border dynamics. The series was edited by USIP's Steven Heydemann, senior adviser for Middle East Initiatives; and Scott Lasensky, a senior program officer. Through this series, several related workshops and events held in September and October, and on-going programs that bring together experts, civil society figures and officials, the Institute aims to provide applied analysis and on-the-ground conflict management tools in support of political transitions across the Arab world.

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Endotes

1. Ally of Assad Says Syria Will Fight Protests Till 'the End' (*New York Times,* Anthony Shadid, May 10)
2. SYRIA: Crisis may hurt economies of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq (*Los Angeles Times,* Ibrahim Saif, August 13)
3. Iraqi Leader Backs Syria, With a Nudge From Iran (*New York Times,* Michael Schmidt and Yasir Ghazi, August 12)
4. Iraqi Shi'ites fear fallout of Syria turbulence (Reuters, Rania El-Gamal, Sept 28)
5. Citizens in Al-Anbar state sectarian issues behind withdrawn citizenships (Sharqiya, Sept 12)
6. Iraq should back Syria's uprising (*The Guardian,* Hayder al-Khoei, June 10)
7. Iraq Calls for Assad to Resign in Syria (*New York Times,* Michael Schmidt and Yasir Ghazi, September 20). In a sign of the complexity of this issue, the advisor quickly repudiated the comments attributed to him in the article.

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