

An Iraqi-Syrian Entente?

Prospects and Implications

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Brief Analysis

On June 2, after a seventeen-year closure, Syria opened its border at three points to its neighbor and long-time rival Iraq. The move, coming amidst unusual reciprocal visits of Iraqi and Syrian business delegations to each others' capitals, suggests an economic marriage of convenience. There is a possibility, however, that it could presage a larger political modus vivendi among the two bitter Ba'athi ruling party rivals who have not enjoyed diplomatic relations since 1980 and who opposed one another during the 1991 Gulf War. Indeed, Iraq's government-controlled Babil newspaper on May 31 called for the creation of a Syrian-Iraqi-Iranian cooperation front to change the regional balance of power. While such a shift does not appear imminent-Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara called such a trilateral alliance to confront Israel and Turkey "an illusion"-the first steps toward reconciliation point to a potentially dangerous development that, at a minimum, will pose new problems for the United Nations effort to enforce economic sanctions on Iraq.

Ba'athi Socialist Realism: While there has been speculation in the Arab media of a larger diplomatic reconciliation (Al-Sha'b, Cairo reported on its front page May 23 that the two sides will re-establish diplomatic relations at an Assad-Saddam summit, and the pro-Syrian Lebanese magazine Al-Shira reported an upcoming Damascus visit by Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz), the steps towards reconciliation, so far, have been limited to the commercial realm. Syrian Foreign Minister Shara dampened expectations for renewed diplomatic ties, telling a Cairo press conference June 4 that Damascus is not yet ready to take that step. Nonetheless, the first step towards renewed economic ties was taken late last month, when a large Syrian business delegation led by Ratib al-Shallah, the chairman of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, traveled to Baghdad for three days, where they met with the Iraqi trade, oil, transport, and industry ministers, and signed food and pharmaceutical contracts worth some \$20 million, according to The Financial Times. While in Baghdad, al-Shallah announced the availability of Syria's Mediterranean ports (such as Latakia) as well as Lebanon's northern port at Tripoli as an outlet for Iraq. The two sides discussed the sale to Iraq of Syrian surplus wheat and grain and the reopening of Iraq's oil pipeline, closed since 1982, that traverses Syria to the Mediterranean port at Banias. Since then, a reciprocal visit to Damascus was paid by an Iraqi business delegation. Most significant, Syria opened three border posts along its Iraqi border at Abu Kamal, Abu al-Shamat and Tal Qoujik, allowing Syrian and Iraqi businessmen to cross.

Syrian Push, Iraqi Pull: While Iraq is desperate to break out of its regional and international isolation, it is Syria's change in approach that allows for these new developments. Baghdad's interest in renewing economic relations with Syria, if not diplomatic relations, has been a constant theme in the post-Gulf War sanctions period. Syria's interest is relatively new, and not altogether complete, however, as demonstrated by a two-week long delay in reporting the travel of its delegation to Baghdad in the official Syrian media and Shara's recent comments on renewed diplomatic ties. Several factors explain Syria's tentative receptivity to a renewed dalliance with Iraq. First and apparently foremost, Syria sees an opportunity to tap into a potentially lucrative market opened by last December's United Nations Security Council Resolution 986, renewed for another six month term just last week, which allows Baghdad

to sell \$2 billion worth of oil over a six month period in exchange for food and medicine. With neighboring Jordan and Turkey already taking advantage of these economic opportunities, Syria is eager not to be left out.

Second, Syria's flirtation with Iraq sends a signal to the rest of the region and to Washington that Syria may not be as isolated in the region as most observers believe, and that Damascus may have other options. Those analysts who see Syria desiring peace with Israel argue that this puts pressure on Israel to accept Syria's price for resuming negotiations. Regardless, Syria is extremely agitated over burgeoning Turkish-Israeli strategic ties, viewing the two non-Arab states' relationship as a vise with Syria squeezed at two ends. Hence, a renewed relationship with Baghdad signals both Israel and Turkey that Syria has other potential strategic options. Ankara's dispatch of reportedly 40,000 Turkish troops into northern Iraq in mid-May, which Syria's Vice-President Khaddam dubbed "an invasion and an occupation of Arab territory," seems to have heightened Syrian concerns over "Turkish-Israeli encirclement" and spurred Damascus to action-despite what appears to be Baghdad's tacit approval for the Turkish incursion.

Significant Obstacles: For the time being, it is too early to see this incipient economic relationship as an emerging strategic alliance; for this to be so, the two would have to surmount numerous profound obstacles. First and most pronounced, Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad would have to find a way to overcome three decades of mutual hatred and animosity, the depth of which cannot be overstated. This rivalry goes well beyond personal antagonism over who is the true standard bearer of Michel Aflaq's Ba'athist ideological legacy, and seeps down into the ruling party establishments in both countries (The two president's body guards reportedly engaged in a nearly fatal bloody brawl during an attempt at a summit reconciliation between the two leaders in the late 1970s).

Second, Iraq would have to overcome the sense that it been betrayed twice in recent history by Syria (first by Damascus' support for Persian Iran in the eight-year Iraq-Iran War, a stab-in-the-back against a fellow Arab state for which Saddam has never forgiven Assad; and second for Damascus' participation in the U.S.-led coalition to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991). Third, Damascus' now longstanding relationship with Iran, which not only brings Syria discounted oil but also helps contain Iraq, would not easily be forsaken by Syria, and would therefore continue to vex Baghdad. Fourth, neither Egypt (which has helped bring Syria back into the mainstream Arab fold) nor Saudi Arabia (which has helped bankroll Damascus for Syrian participation in the 1991 anti-Iraq coalition) would look too kindly upon Syria's improved ties with Iraq. Finally, it is unlikely that Saddam would accept much more than a tactical alliance, for fear of spurring pro-Syrian Ba'athist elements within Iraq, a major cause of the two countries' estrangement. Moreover, any larger strategic alliance would likely suffer the same fate as their most recent unity scheme in the 1970s, which fell apart soon after it was established.

The Immediate Challenge: Even a limited Syrian-Iraqi economic relationship, however, will pose problems for the maintenance of UN sanctions on Iraq. Enforcing UNSCR 986 along the Syrian-Iraqi border is likely to prove virtually impossible under present circumstances. For starters, there are no UN monitors to ensure that proscribed goods do not cross the border. Thus, stronger verification measures should be put in place, such as the dispatch of UN inspectors to Syrian-Iraqi frontier posts. UN challenge inspections will need to be introduced to ensure that cheating along Iraq's borders does not threaten the overall integrity of the embargo. Moreover, Syria and Iraq should be queried officially about the contracts signed between their two countries, and sternly reminded that the flow of goods across their border, if not approved by the UN sanctions committee, could constitute a violation of international law. Such a bid would be a fresh challenge to a somewhat leaky sanctions regime that must be resisted, lest the regime further erode along a slippery slope. If Syria is in search of new regional economic opportunities, it should not be encouraged to turn toward Iraq and thereby aggravate the difficulties in enforcing sanctions; instead, the United States should take the lead in seeking tightening of the UN sanctions regime and in urging Damascus to participate in alternative avenues towards increased trade, investment and economic improvement, such as the Middle East/ North Africa (MENA) economic summit, scheduled for November 1997 in Qatar.

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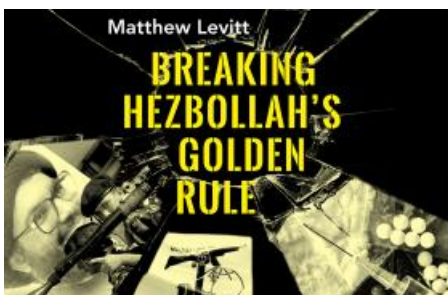
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