

# Assad's Fall and Iraqi Stability

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Jan 30, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Assad's ouster would create significant risk of widespread violence in Iraq, but also a fleeting opportunity to regain leverage over the Maliki government.**

**T**his PolicyWatch is part of "*Syrian Spillover: Perspectives from Neighboring States* (<http://washin.st/11a1tS4>)," a series of articles on how the conflict is affecting Turkey, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon.

As a fragile postconflict state, Iraq can ill afford the chaos currently roiling in neighboring Syria. If President Bashar al-Assad's regime collapses, large segments of north-central and western Iraq could become deeply unstable, with local factions opening a de facto civil war against federal forces, whether temporarily or indefinitely. For the United States, keeping Iraq on an even keel would be a supreme test of diplomatic skill at a moment when attention would understandably be focused on Syria itself. But such a crisis could also open a window of opportunity to reestablish influence over Baghdad.

## SECTARIAN DYNAMICS

Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites perceive the Syrian conflict very differently. The majority Shiite population sees it as a frightening, negative development. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's administration is the first modern Arab government to be led by Shiites, and in their view, major Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey will not tolerate this state of affairs in the long term. Reflecting their historical sense of victimization, the newly dominant Iraqi Shiites see the Syria crisis as the beginning of a revanchist Sunni backlash, and they fear their hold on Baghdad may be the next domino to fall.

These factors, combined with continued Iranian influence, have spurred Maliki to seek a negotiated end to the Syrian conflict. He has also allowed Tehran-sponsored assistance to flow to Assad via Iraq, even tolerating the movement of Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite militias (e.g., Asaib Ahl al-Haq) into Syria to bolster the regime's fighting

strength.

Meanwhile, Iraq's minority Sunni Arab community views the conflict next door in an entirely different light. Sunni politicians and militant groups have long portrayed the Maliki government as an Iranian puppet intent on excluding them from all state institutions. After many years of continuous setbacks, some Sunnis view the Syrian uprising and the region's response to it as a light at the end of the tunnel -- the first sign that Sunni states are stepping up to roll back Iran's influence.

Such sentiments have likely contributed to the growing strength of recent Sunni protests across north-central and western Iraq, at which Free Syrian Army flags have been observed on numerous occasions. Syria's war has given Iraq's predominantly Sunni provinces (e.g., Anbar, Ninawa, Salah al-Din) hope that they might one day be able to formally or informally band together with the backing of a powerful Sunni-ruled state. Some factions have also been emboldened by the strong pro-Sunni stance of Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, photos of whom have been noted at recent Sunni protests.

These diverging sectarian sentiments are driving Iraq toward a climactic moment if and when the Assad regime collapses. In that scenario, Maliki and his Shiite constituency would feel unprecedented pressure and anxiety, while Sunnis could become fleetingly triumphal, cohesive, assertive, and prone to miscalculation. The potential for a brutal federal crackdown would therefore be high.

Yet this moment of potential danger is also a moment of potential U.S. leverage. Assad's fall would likely dent the mystique of Iran's supposed regional rise, providing a ripe -- albeit risky -- opportunity to pressure Iraq's errant premier.

## KURDISH DIMENSION

**A**nother potentially destabilizing factor is the growing relationship between Syrian Kurds and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. In October 2011, KRG president Masoud Barzani brought a number of Syrian Kurdish groups together to form the Kurdistan National Council (KNC). The main holdout -- the anti-Turkish Democratic Union Party (PYD) -- has largely resisted Barzani's influence. No one knows the extent to which the KNC and PYD will coexist in Kurdish-held parts of Syria, nor how they will interact with the Sunni Arab-led opposition going forward. Ethnic tensions in a post-Assad Syria could also complicate the burgeoning Turkey-KRG entente, though the Barzanis are likely to place the KRG's needs above any pan-Kurdish concerns.

In addition, these issues could exacerbate Baghdad's ongoing tensions with the KRG. In July 2012, the central government learned the limits of its control when Kurdish elements of the Iraqi Army's 11th Brigade refused to move into KRG-administered parts of the Iraq-Syria border. Although Baghdad's deployment of southern Arab units to the area was ultimately unsuccessful in closing off the KRG's access to Syria, Maliki may try again.

Whether or not Assad falls, and whichever way the Syrian Kurds lean (toward Damascus, Barzani, or even Turkey), the KRG-administered border with Syria will remain key terrain. For the Iraqi Kurds, a post-Assad Syria holds the tantalizing prospect of another route to the sea -- a midterm means of diversifying KRG oil and gas export lanes. Of course, this would require a satisfactory relationship with the Syrian Kurds and the successor government in Damascus; otherwise the KRG could wind up replicating its problematic relationship with Baghdad.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**B**ecause Assad's ouster could spur Iraq's Sunni Arab provinces into open rebellion against Baghdad, U.S. leaders and diplomats must be ready to dedicate focused effort on the Iraqi government and opposition. Advance preparation is essential to ensuring effective crisis management in Iraq at a time when attention would be sucked up by events in Syria. Washington would also need to provide all actors with a sense of calm and perspective, cutting

through the conspiracies and panic that typically attend such moments in Iraq.

U.S. diplomats could also use Assad's departure to regain leverage over Maliki, despite the risk of exacerbating an already-explosive situation. In addition to giving him a laundry list of recommendations, Washington could emphasize the moment's watershed nature, telling him that Iraq must choose to either integrate its future with that of the United States and the broader Arab world, or slide into the dwindling club of isolated Iranian proxies. Such a warning could be linked to signs that the administration is seriously considering "Plan B" -- a turn toward the KRG-Turkish axis and away from Baghdad. The potential impact of this message would only be amplified by Washington's previous reticence to get tough with Maliki. Although such a strategy could conceivably nudge Maliki closer to Tehran, the clear evidence of Iran's failure to save Assad might be difficult for him to overlook.

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