

Asad's Iraqi Lifeline: Naming, Shaming, and Maiming It

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock), [Ahmed Ali \(/experts/ahmed-ali\)](/experts/ahmed-ali)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



[Ahmed Ali \(/experts/ahmed-ali\)](/experts/ahmed-ali)

Ahmed Ali is a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy.



Brief Analysis

Remarkably, as Syria's increasingly isolated President Asad continues his bloody crackdown on a popular uprising, Iraq is throwing him a lifeline.

Avital yet utterly neglected avenue for applying pressure on Syria's beleaguered President Bashar al-Asad is lurking in plain sight: that of cutting, or at least constricting, the economic, political, and security lifeline that connects his regime to Iraq. Pursuit of such an end should be the next step for U.S. policymakers.

Even as most of Asad's former Arab, Turkish, and other friends have pulled back their support in response to Damascus's brutal crackdown on protestors and reformists, Iraq has stood out in its continuing loyalty to the regime. On an economic level, Iraq is now doing considerable trade with Syria, with the annual figure at more than \$2 billion. In addition, Iraq continues to host high-level economic representatives from the Syrian regime and business community. Moreover, Iraq is supplying Syria with urgently needed oil and, in late July, agreed to enact a major expansion of the pipeline network (ostensibly costing \$10 billion over three years) for both its own and Iranian oil and gas shipments to Syria and Lebanon. The Iraqi government has reportedly even agreed to renew hundreds of millions of dollars in Saddam-era contracts with Syria, as a way of infusing cash into the coffers of Asad's cronies.

Political relations between Syria and Iraq also appear to be strengthening, with ministerial-level visits occurring -- accompanied by considerable fanfare -- in June, July, and August of this year. On August 25, the independent Baghdad online daily *al-Nahrayn* reported in its lead article that "following up on [Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's letter to Asad a few days ago," senior Iraqi officials are "shuttling between Damascus and Tehran as a tripartite security alliance begins to crystallize." While reports of such an alliance are unconfirmed, they have the

ring of truth given other signs pointing in the same direction.

Official rhetoric from Baghdad has reflected this warming trend toward the Syrian regime. In May, Maliki publicly advocated reform in Syria, but under Asad's direction -- and kept conspicuously silent about the massacres committed by Asad's forces. By mid-August, language from the prime minister's office had veered toward the outrageous, parroting the accusation from Damascus and Tehran that Israel, rather than Syria's own citizenry, somehow held responsibility for Asad's dire situation. Other Iraqi leaders besides Maliki have demonstrated support for Damascus. In August, Iraqi president Jalal Talabani sent one of his deputies to confer privately with the Syrian leader, without voicing a word of criticism in public. Syria's official news agency was quick to trumpet this visit as a sign of unqualified Iraqi government support. And Iraqiyah Party leader Ayad Allawi, in a Washington Post op-ed otherwise urging greater U.S. support for Arab democracy (and lamenting Maliki's defects in this regard), made no mention at all of Iraq's own opposition to democracy next door in Syria.

Iraq has also distinguished itself for the worse, as compared with Turkey, with respect to victims of Syrian repression. Whereas the Turks have left their border open for Syrian refugees fleeing Asad's depredations, Baghdad has closed its border. Iraq has also failed to emulate its Turkish neighbor by inviting Syrian dissidents to organize on its territory, appear on its television stations, or meet with its officials. And unlike leaders in Turkey, as well as Riyadh and other regional capitals, senior leaders in Baghdad have expressed no impatience with Asad's bloody crackdown.

The Iran Factor

Underlying Baghdad's position on Syria is intense pressure from the Iranians. For example, Iran has recently ramped up its shelling of Iraqi border areas in the north.

While such actions are ostensibly directed against a handful of rebels from the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), they signal in reality Iran's ability to punish Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) if either strays too far from Tehran's policy preferences. Bolstering such an assumption, on September 5, Iran summarily rejected a ceasefire offer from PJAK and, in reaction, on September 7, Massoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, reportedly canceled a visit to Tehran. On the Western front, one major Iranian newspaper warned on August 29 that Syria could export "warfare" to its neighbors if they turned against its regime; on the same day, another Tehran paper warned that Muslims would take to the streets in protest against a government that abandoned Asad. Even more ominously, the radical, Iran-allied Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr announced in late August that he was now standing up against the call for Asad's resignation "by the 'Leader of Evilness' Obama and others."

Such threats from abroad and at home are effective because Iraq is weak, unstable, preoccupied with its own serious internal problems, and of course sandwiched between Iran and Syria. So pervasive are Iraqi fears of Iran's pressure that many Iraqi officials privately worry that, if Asad does fall, Tehran will double down on its intervention in Iraqi affairs to compensate for the loss of its Syrian ally. In the words of Baghdad political analyst Ihsan al-Shammari, "Iran, which supports the Syrian regime, is a main player in Iraq, so taking a different stance...might negatively affect many joint files between Iraq and Iran."

Other Factors

Beyond Iran's influence, several factors contribute to Iraq's anomalous pro-Asad stance. The most benign is concern over the fate of the million-plus Iraqi refugees still in Syria. Another is the personal debt owed by both Maliki and Talabani to the Syrian regime for sheltering them during the Saddam era. More substantive, perhaps, are Iraqi fears that Asad could exercise his proven ability, even now, to send still more Baathist, al-Qaeda, and other terrorists into Iraq if Baghdad turns against him. Looming over the entire scene is the huge uncertainty about what

might happen after Asad falls, including the possibility that a cross-border campaign of revenge may occur if a Sunni-dominated regime prevails.

Actual sentiment by Iraqi leaders and citizens, however, reveals a possible split from public statements out of Baghdad. Many Iraqis are quietly cheering the Syrian people in their efforts against the Asad regime. And in private conversations with the authors, held both in the United States and Iraq, senior Iraqi officials took strong issue with their government's support for Asad.

As of early September, some of these divisions on the Syria issue have begun to surface, with anti-Asad views coming mostly from a handful of Sunni Arab leaders. For example, the prominent parliamentarian Usama al-Nujaifi, who as recently as last February made an official trip to Damascus to court Syrian leaders, has now denounced Asad's acts of repression. And on August 12, the chairman of Iraq's Sunni *waqf* called on "the Syrian army to stop killing its compatriots." A few other Sunni Arab figures have publicly echoed this message. On September 7, the maverick Iraqi politician Mithal al-Alussi spoke even more sharply, accusing the Iraqi government of secretly supporting the Asad regime.

Such voices may be new to emerge, but they are not alone. This past May, extensive discussions by the author in Iraqi Kurdistan revealed the private hope of most leaders for Asad's downfall. And within Iraq's cabinet itself, dissenting views have become vocal enough that, on August 24, President Talabani was moved to declare his "wish that the brother ministers would unite their statements" so as to avoid a "fuss" with any of Iraq's neighbors. The divisions suggested here offer precisely the basis for beginning to constrict Asad's Iraqi lifeline.

U.S. Policy Implications

Admittedly, this conundrum in Iraqi-Syrian relations comes at an extraordinarily delicate moment, as the United States and Iraq try to negotiate a new security partnership in the face of a year-end deadline for the withdrawal of all U.S. troops. The United States is understandably reluctant to overload an already precarious package with demands regarding Syria. Moreover, it is becoming apparent that Iraq's overall foreign policy will henceforth go its own way.

The cause of pushing Iraq to reverse its support for Syria is not lost, however. Discreetly, but energetically, U.S. officials should lobby their Iraqi counterparts to distance themselves immediately from Syria's dictator. Such an effort should focus first on those officials who are known to be privately receptive to such a vision. In addition, Washington should enlist the support of Turkey and the Gulf Arab states, some of which may be willing to offset the loss in Iraqi trade with Syria. And, finally, Iraq's oil pipeline to Syria might be disrupted; it has already been sabotaged at least once, on May 12.

Looking a bit farther into the future, the United States should try to put Iraqi leaders in touch with figures in the Syrian opposition, while perhaps noting that Iran is reportedly already doing the same. Though official Iraqi support for anti-Asad elements is too far-fetched to contemplate any time soon, at least such contacts might help allay Iraqi concerns about the implications of switching to a more neutral stance for now. Nor is it premature to suggest that U.S. support for Iraq's border security with Syria in a post-Asad era should become part of existing discussions about long-term security cooperation.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. Ahmed Ali is a Marcia Robbins-Wilf research associate at The Washington Institute, focusing on Iraqi politics. ❖

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