

# Syrian-Iraqi Relations: A New Chapter?

by [Seth Wikas \(/experts/seth-wikas\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Seth Wikas \(/experts/seth-wikas\)](#)

Seth Wikas is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on opposition elements to the Syrian regime.



## Brief Analysis

**S**yrria and Iraq began a new phase in their relationship two months ago with the resumption of diplomatic ties and the visits of Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Muallem to Baghdad and Iraqi president Jalal Talabani to Damascus. At the same time, however, the United States continues to criticize Syria for the inadequate monitoring of its border with Iraq. While demonstrating its willingness to be engaged on Iraq, Syria has ended its open-door policy toward Iraqi refugees, pushing their interests aside in this new stage of bilateral relations.

### Moves on the Diplomatic Front

In late November 2006, the Syrian and Iraqi foreign ministries announced they would restore diplomatic ties after a break of nearly a quarter century. Although the two maintained relations during the 1990s, when Iraq defied UN sanctions by selling oil via Syria, Damascus did not maintain an embassy in Baghdad. Al-Muallem first visited Iraq on November 22 and spoke with senior Iraqi officials, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and President Talabani during a two-day visit to the capital. On December 11, the Iraqi embassy in Damascus raised the Iraqi flag in the presence of Iraqi foreign and interior ministry officials, while a similar ceremony took place at the Syrian embassy in Baghdad. Nearly two months after the opening of these embassies, the Syrians have yet to send an ambassador -- though a charge d'affaires, Bacher ash-Shar, is currently residing in Baghdad. (Besides Jordan and the Arab League -- whose ambassador announced he will resign later this month -- no Arab countries maintain accredited ambassadors in Baghdad.)

Shortly after the Iraqi embassy opened in Damascus, Syrian interior minister Bassam Abdulmajid and Iraqi interior minister Jawad al-Bulani signed a five-year defense cooperation agreement. Its provisions include the exchange of information relevant to the fight against terrorism and organized crime, including smuggling and document counterfeiting; tighter monitoring of the shared border; and the training of Iraqi special forces units. The big question is to what extent the Syrian government will crack down on the movement of foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq, for which the Bush administration has consistently criticized the regime.

When Talabani visited Damascus in January, he was the first Iraqi president to do so in nearly three decades. He was accompanied on his six-day visit by members of all Iraqi parliamentary blocs, as well as representatives of both Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Corps of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. The visit followed President George W. Bush's announcement of a new Iraq strategy that includes the deployment of 21,500 additional troops to help secure Baghdad. While Washington has rebuffed the Iraq Study Group report's recommendations to initiate a dialogue with Syria, Talabani's visit suggests that Iraq is

interested in seeing whether Syria will assume an active, positive role. At the conclusion of Talabani's January visit, the two sides issued a statement emphasizing their mutual security interests, offering joint condemnation of "all forms of terrorism against Iraqis, infrastructure, places of worship, and military and civilian institutions," and committing themselves to the goal of "ending the foreign military presence in the country."

During the visit, Iraqi and Syrian officials also signed a number of agreements on economic, financial, and oil issues, while the interior ministers concluded bilateral extradition agreements. Although Iraq is convinced that security is the foundation for political and economic growth, the Syrians pushed for a political and economic "umbrella" leading to security. Moreover, in an olive branch to Syria, Talabani condemned the Iraqi "de-Baathification law," met the Baath regional leadership in Damascus, and announced his readiness to cooperate with Iraqi Baathists who worked against Saddam Hussein's regime.

Given the regime's performance to date, Syria's willingness to follow through on these agreements will be a key issue to follow. During a recent interview with ABC News, President Bashar al-Asad stated that his country was "not the single player, but . . . the main player in this [Iraq] issue." Nevertheless, Syria has yet to show the international community that it is actively engaged in enhancing Iraq's stability and security. Damascus has made numerous statements on the issue since 2003, but it has not made a tangible difference on the ground.

### Refugees

Immediately following these high-level diplomatic exchanges, Syria imposed restrictions on visas for Iraqi refugees. Since the coalition invasion in 2003, Syria had welcomed Iraqis fleeing their home country, with the Syrian interior ministry issuing renewable three-month residency permits. Earlier this month, however, Syria discontinued this policy, replacing it with fifteen-day permits that can be renewed only once and only when accompanied by special documents. It also suspended Iraqi Airways flights into Damascus. Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh denounced the new measure, adding that "half the murders and bombings in Iraq are by Arab extremists coming from Syria." On February 5, nearly 200 Iraqi refugees staged a protest outside the offices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Damascus, demanding assistance. UNHCR chief Antonio Guterres is currently conducting a regional tour -- including a visit to Syria -- to discuss the Iraqi refugee crisis.

Syria's new visa measure is a radical policy change. Over the past few years, it has allowed Iraqis to live in Syrian towns and villages, use Syrian medical services, and send their children to Syrian public schools. The situation now, however, is different than on the eve of the invasion in March 2003. According to UNHCR statistics from December 2006, there are between 600,000 and one million Iraqi refugees in Syria, making it host to the largest number of refugees from that country in the Arab world. Entire neighborhoods both in and outside Damascus are completely dominated by Iraqis and Iraqi-owned businesses. The prices of real estate and food in greater Damascus have dramatically increased over the past three years, as have complaints of overcrowded schools. Many Syrians also blame Iraqis for a dramatic rise in crime rates.

According to the Associated Press, 300,000 of the Iraqi refugees in Syria are Shiites. A traditional home to both Iraqi and Iranian Shiites, the Sayidda Zeinab suburb of Damascus has seen explosive growth in its Iraqi Shiite population. Its mayor, Adil Anuz, stated in October 2006 that the suburb's Iraqi population had skyrocketed to 100,000, representing nearly one-third of the total inhabitants. The Iraqi influence on the area is clear, Anuz added, noting the prevalence of Iraqi dialects, food stalls, and modes of dress.

### Conclusion

Syria's reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Baghdad after nearly a quarter century may indicate that it is ready to begin playing a positive role in Iraq's future. Syria also understands that the free pass it has given to Iraqi refugees living in the capital is no longer tenable, as its resources are stretched to the limit. The timing of the new

visa restrictions points to a new phase in Syrian-Iraqi relations, where bilateral action comes at the expense of providing for displaced Iraqis. After a joint statement denouncing terrorism and affirming Syrian support for national reconciliation, renewed security, and economic cooperation, only Syria's actions will indicate whether it is serious about helping to stabilize Iraq -- or if it is simply offering encouraging rhetoric.

Seth Wikas is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Syria's domestic politics and foreign policy. Institute research assistant Rana Shabb assisted in the preparation of this PolicyWatch. ❖

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