

Syria's Response to the Baker-Hamilton Report

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

Dec 5, 2006

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

On December 6, the long-awaited report of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), often referred to as the Baker-Hamilton commission, will be available to the public. One of the report's recommendations is likely to be direct talks with Iran and Syria, providing plenty of fodder for American politicians, journalists, and foreign policy experts. But what do Syrian sources have to say about the report and its implications for US policy?

Syria's three main daily newspapers—al-Thawra, al-Baath, and Tishreen—are all government owned and carefully censored. Other progovernment news sources are online sites such as Champress, Ash-Sham News, and Syria-News.com. Each provides daily coverage of Iraq-related issues, using both international news services and the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). They also publish many editorials and opinion columns, both from foreign sources (including translations from the international press) and by Syrians. When the major dailies have relatively uniform opinions on a topic, it is highly likely that their position reflects the government view.

Background: How Iraq is Viewed and Covered

The Syrian papers paint a uniformly negative picture of the situation in Iraq. A major theme in the Syrian press, as in much of the Arab press, is that the American invasion of Iraq is yet another example in a long history of Western imperialism, this time cloaked with a veneer of democracy. The invasion was carried out in order to realize American and Zionist interests, and when it comes to the Middle East, Israel is America's first priority. The newspapers unanimously condemn President George W. Bush (and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld) for the chaos and violence afflicting its eastern neighbor. Noticeably absent from Syrian coverage of the war in Iraq are issues that have made headlines in the American and European press, including foreign fighters crossing into Iraq via the Syrian border and Syrian funds and materiel making their way into the hands of Sunni insurgents.

With respect to Syrian involvement in Iraq, the three major dailies all cover the foreign (mostly European) delegations President Bashar al-Asad and other Syrian officials have received over the past few weeks. The stories emphasize Syria's concern over the crisis in Iraq and its ability to play a cooperative regional role.

The Syrian Press on the ISG

Syrian press reports about the ISG have been quite straightforward, emphasizing its bipartisan constituency and its goals of providing the Bush administration with alternative courses of action. Syrian opinion pieces, however, view the ISG report as a way for the Bush administration to admit failure. The word "failure" (fashl in Arabic) is used extensively in the Syrian press to describe the U.S. military intervention in Iraq. Khalaf al-Jarrad, editor-in-chief of

Tishreen, bluntly titled his November 7 op-ed, “Can Baker Fix What Bush Has Destroyed?” The prominent dailies report that the ISG is a way for the Bush administration to save face in light of the increasingly intractable situation in Iraq. Articles and analysis pieces repeat the phrases “lifeline,” “dead end,” and “noble exit” in rhetoric describing a hopeless situation from which the Bush administration must extract itself.

The Syrian press connects the ISG with what it describes as Bush’s failed policy in Iraq and the Republican Party’s loss in the 2006 congressional elections. Articles in Tishreen and al-Baath indicate to their Syrian readership that the U.S. failure in Iraq resulted in a seismic change—the term “earthquake” is used many times—in U.S. domestic public opinion, which caused the Republican Party’s electoral losses. Muhammad Kuneisi, writing in an al-Baath article titled “Two Readings of the American Failure in Iraq,” posited that the failure in Iraq and the Republican electoral losses, in addition to Rumsfeld’s resignation and the Bush administration’s “call for help” in the form of the ISG, point to “the beginning of the end” of U.S. involvement in Iraq. The same article also suggested an alternative reading of the ISG and Rumsfeld’s resignation as part of a grand strategy by the Bush administration to change course but still fulfill its strategic goals in Iraq.

Some space has been devoted to the role of James A. Baker III, co-chair of the ISG. Al-Jarrad’s November 7 Tishreen editorial offered an elaborate (and at times both sarcastic and complimentary) assessment of Baker as a statesman. Quoting from his memoirs, al-Jarrad criticized Baker’s observation that he “possesses the necessary negotiation and political acumen” for statesmanship. On the other hand, the author conceded that Baker may be the right man for the job because of Baker’s familiarity with the Arab players in the Middle East and his identification of former Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad as a sincere man, a hard negotiator, and a serious thinker for whom Baker had great respect. Al-Jarrad also repeated Baker’s assertion that Syria is the key to regional peace and stability.

The Syrian press has expressed skepticism about whether Bush will follow reported ISG recommendations for direct dialogue with Damascus and Tehran, a phased drawdown of troops, and greater coordination with the Iraqi security forces. All three of the major Syrian dailies have, over the course of the past two weeks, included Bush’s oft-made statement that he is not required to follow all of the ISG’s recommendations. The December 4 edition of Tishreen led with the news of Bush’s statement that the ISG report is one of many resources he will consider regarding a change of direction in Iraq. While the press uniformly denounces the Bush policy, some writers view the ISG report as a glimmer of hope. A long piece posted last week on the Champress website sees the ISG report as a sign that the United States wishes to reconsider its policies and discontinue its Iraq “adventure.”

Response by the Government

The Syrian government has not released any significant statements on the ISG report to the domestic or foreign press. The only official to comment on the ISG is the Syrian ambassador in Washington, Imad Mustapha, who coordinated the New York meetings between members of the ISG and Syrian foreign minister Walid al-Muallem during the UN General Assembly in September 2006. Mustapha has repeatedly welcomed the suggestion of direct talks between the United States and Syria and Iran, stressing the constructive role the latter two nations can play in stabilizing Iraq. In his nearly four years as ambassador, Mustapha has repeatedly stressed the advantages of dialogue in his interviews and speeches. The Syrian government, however, has made the chances for this difficult, having been implicated in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri and allowing Hamas leader Khaled Meshal to reside in Damascus. One reading of this juxtaposition is that Mustapha’s role is to be Syria’s advocate for dialogue, but his calls for talks do not necessarily reflect any willingness in Damascus for policy changes.

On the issue of whether to assist the United States in promoting stability in Iraq, the Syrian government has indicated its policy positions through rhetoric and actions. According to the Economist, last month Bashar al-Asad made clear to British emissary Sir Nigel Sheinwald four conditions for greater regional cooperation: (1) an end to the

UN investigation into Syria's role in the Hariri assassination; (2) a guarantee that Washington will not try to undermine the Syrian regime; (3) a return of Syria's influence in Lebanon; and (4) the return of the Golan Heights. Asad is not averse to talking to the United States or playing a constructive role in Iraq, but he has given his price.

On a more hopeful note, in late November, al-Mouallem visited Baghdad and reestablished Syrian-Iraqi diplomatic ties. There were some indications during that trip that Syria is prepared to work more closely with the Iraqi government. Sending an ambassador-level official to Iraq and fulfilling its promise to restore an embassy in Baghdad would indicate that Syria is interested in Iraq's stability.

Conclusions

The Syrian press welcomes any change in U.S. policy in Iraq but is highly skeptical that President Bush will follow the ISG's recommendations. Irrespective of any suggested or implemented policy change, Asad has already announced his conditions for adopting a significantly more positive regional role.

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

Policy #1172

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)