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The Syrian Crisis: Iraq Caught Between Iran and the United States

The Syrian crisis has highlighted a problem for Iraq that has been growing for years. Geographic realities dictate that it is dangerous for any Iraqi regime to antagonize the country's larger eastern neighbor, Iran. Beyond that factor, the Shia-led government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has always seemed inclined to have friendly relations with its co-religionists in Iran.

Indeed, U.S. leaders have viewed Baghdad's close ties with Tehran with a mixture of uneasiness and irritation for years. The Obama administration, like the previous Bush administration, has urged and pressured Maliki's government to support tough economic sanctions against Iran and to take other measures to distance Iraqi policies from those of its neighbor. Those efforts have been notable for their lack of success. Baghdad has consistently rebuffed Washington's objections and refused to support U.S. goals.

The mounting turmoil and bloodshed in Syria is making it impossible to conceal the depth of the disagreement between the U.S. and Iraqi governments. Washington and its NATO allies, along with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, clearly seek to topple Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. Although the rationale for taking stronger action against Assad is the brutal force his regime has employed against its domestic adversaries, that consideration is, at most, one factor among many.

The campaign against Assad involves two major motives that link the Saudis and their allies and the United States and its NATO partners. Because Assad is a key ally of Tehran's, both the Western nations and the Saudi bloc have targeted him for removal. To the Saudis, Syria represents an important geopolitical prize in Middle East. Ousting Assad would weaken the principal Shia power, Iran, and greatly enhance Riyadh's influence as a leading Sunni power. To the United States and NATO, removing Assad is a crucial first step in thwarting Iran's nuclear ambitions—and beyond that goal, achieving forcible regime change.

Despite the shrill rhetoric that advocates of humanitarian intervention routinely use, the domestic struggle in Syria is extremely murky. The Assad government is assuredly corrupt and brutal, but the so-called Free Syrian Army is a collection of factions, several of which seem to be dangerous and undemocratic. The likelihood is that, if it were not for Assad's ties to Tehran, Washington and its European allies would not care all that much about what happens in Syria. They might well display the same aloofness they have shown toward far bloodier struggles in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

But because of the Iran factor, Washington and its allies are determined to oust Assad's government, and they are putting excruciating pressure on Baghdad to assist that effort. In part because of counter-pressure from Iran, the Maliki government has refused to support the anti-Assad policy. Iraq's foreign minister bluntly rejected suggestions that his country back a new round of sanctions against Damascus.

No matter what the Maliki government does, Iraq is placed in an extremely uncomfortable position. If it caves in to Western and Saudi pressure, it will antagonize Tehran. That would entail dangers in terms of both international and domestic policy. Iran is capable of causing an array of headaches for Iraq, both economically and militarily. And given the size and power of the Shia population in Iraq itself, Maliki would be risking his political future by taking that course.

Yet it is also dangerous for Iraq to defy its wealthy Saudi neighbor, especially regarding Riyadh's feud with Tehran. The Saudis have already provided arms and money to Sunni Arab factions in Iraq—groups that have resisted the Maliki government's authority, often with violence. Riyadh could do more along those lines.

It is perhaps even riskier for Iraq to continuedefying Washington. U.S. leaders have a long track record of viewing "uncooperative" governments as enemies of the United States and candidates for removal from power. The Maliki regime is already close to having that status. Thwarting the U.S. goal of overthrowing Assad could well bring relations between Washington and Baghdad to their lowest point in the post-Saddam era.

No matter what policy the Maliki government adopts regarding the Syrian crisis and the larger confrontation between Iran and its many adversaries, Iraq will find itself in an unpleasant, vulnerable position.

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