

SYRIA

A NEW ERA?

JPS

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معهد
السياسة والمجتمع
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“ABOUT JPS

There is often a significant gap between political transformations, both domestic and international, and the knowledge produced by researchers, academics, and specialists regarding social issues and phenomena. Despite the proliferation of many journals in the human and social sciences, there is a shortage of publications that provide deep, research-based knowledge and perspectives, that offer valuable alternatives and recommendations to decision-makers across various policy dimensions.

The Jordanian Politics & Society Magazine (JPS), published periodically by the Politics and Society Institute, aims to fill this gap. JPS serves as a scientific platform dedicated to fostering rigorous intellectual debate on issues related to domestic and foreign policies at regional and international levels, with a particular focus on the Jordanian political landscape. The magazine emphasizes the development of scientific and intellectual concepts to address various real-world variables and promotes the exchange of ideas and interactive efforts among specialists.

Note

The views and opinions expressed in the magazine are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of neither PSI nor the Editors.

Iraq-Syria Relations in the Post Assad Era

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The fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in early December 2024 ushered in a new regional reality, prompting neighbouring states—including Iraq—to begin assessing the potential gains and losses stemming from this development. Historically, Iraqi-Syrian relations have been among the most complex in the region, shaped by fluctuating dynamics, periods of conflict and reconciliation. What remained constant, however, was the lack of a stable trajectory, particularly after former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad rose to power in their respective countries. From that point onwards, relations between the two states became some of the most strained in the Middle East, most notably during the Iran–Iraq War of the 1980s, when the Syrian regime sided with Iran against Iraq.

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent fall of Saddam

Hussein's regime, Syria became heavily involved in Iraq. In close coordination with Iran, it facilitated the entry of dozens of armed militants into Iraqi territory to undermine the American strategy there and deter any potential shift of focus toward Damascus or Tehran after the occupation of Baghdad. Notably, the administration of former US President George W. Bush had previously labelled Syria and Iran, along with Iraq, as part of the "Axis of Evil" in the Middle East.

Due to Syria's involvement in Iraq, the two countries experienced significant tensions during this period, particularly when former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki publicly blamed Bashar al-Assad's regime for a wave of deadly bombings that struck Baghdad between 2007 and 2010. However, the dynamic changed after 2011. The onset of the Arab Spring in Syria marked a turning point in Iraqi-Syrian relations.

Sectarian considerations came to the fore, reshaping bilateral ties along ideological lines. Iran played a significant role in reinforcing this by linking the stability of Iraq's political system to the survival of the Syrian regime. It argued that the Sunni threat posed by the Syrian opposition was not only a danger to the Alawite-led regime in Damascus, but also to the Shia-led political experiment in Iraq and, more broadly, to the so-called "Axis of Resistance" led by Tehran. These arguments prompted Maliki to open Iraq's borders with Syria and facilitate the flow of thousands of fighters, weapons, and logistical support to prevent the Assad regime from falling to opposition forces. As a result of this position, numerous Iraqi armed factions entered Syria under the pretext of defending Shia holy sites and securing a land corridor that would connect Tehran to Beirut via Damascus. Iraq thus served as a strategic bridge in a corridor that became the lifeline of the Assad regime, one that helped it survive the strains of a protracted and brutal conflict.

The unexpected collapse of Assad's regime and the subsequent withdrawal of both Iran and Russia from Syria place the post-Assad state before daunting challenges—challenges not unlike those Iraq faced after Saddam's fall. The key difference, however, lies in the nature of international engagement: Syria now enjoys a level of regional and global attention that Iraq lacked during its own post-regime transition. For Iraq, the pressing question is how to respond to this new regional reality and how its political leadership will

navigate the emerging landscape in the wake of Assad's fall.

The Moment of Political Re-engagement with Damascus

With the success of Syrian opposition forces in capturing Aleppo, Iraqi political concerns began to rise dramatically. These concerns stemmed primarily from the traumatic experience of ISIS's emergence in Iraq in 2014, considering al-Sharaa's prior connections with the jihadist trajectory. This connection contributed to Iraq's deep sense of unease, due not only to al-Sharaa's jihadist background, but also to fears about the implications of a new Syrian reality in which a jihadist group had seized the reins of power.



Several factors led Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani to adopt a non-interventionist stance. Chief among them were Iraqi intelligence assessments at the time, which concluded that Assad's forces would be unable to withstand the opposition's advances.

While opposition forces continued their advance, eventually reaching the Syrian capital Damascus, the Iraqi government reinforced its border security. Before this, Baghdad had rejected Iranian pressure and

direct appeals from the Assad regime to become involved in the Syrian conflict, instead insisting on neutrality and focusing solely on border protection, awaiting clearer regional and international stances.

Several factors led Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani to adopt a non-interventionist stance. Chief among them were Iraqi intelligence assessments at the time, which concluded that Assad's forces would be unable to withstand the opposition's advances. Sudani's reluctance to act was also shaped by Iran's hesitancy to intervene, despite its deep-rooted military, economic, and ideological investment in Syria.



A cursory examination of the nature of Iraqi-Syrian relations reveals that they are, without a doubt, overwhelmingly security-centric, despite persistent efforts by both Baghdad and Damascus to move beyond this framework.

Another factor was the lack of consensus among leaders of Iraq's ruling Coordination Framework, who disagreed on a unified position regarding support for Assad. This internal division further reinforced Sudani's decision to remain neutral. He also recognised

that the new political order emerging in Syria would be increasingly shaped by regional and international forces, not by Russia and Iran. Moreover, the role played by the United States in cutting off supply lines to the Assad regime and in preventing any intervention that might hinder the opposition's progress underscored the risks of taking sides. Sudani thus concluded that any ill-considered involvement in Syria, particularly on Assad's behalf, could have severe consequences for Iraq.

This forward-looking assessment of the Syrian battlefield led Sudani to articulate multiple justifications for Iraq's neutrality. Above all, he understood that the sole victor in this conflict was likely to be the Syrian opposition, which was receiving unprecedented regional and international support.

Iraq After Assad

The increasingly vocal positions emerging within Iraq—particularly in the immediate aftermath of Assad's fall—signalled a clear shift in the country's political perceptions. Iraq began expressing conditional recognition of the new political order in Syria, while simultaneously calling for a political process rooted in security and stability. More importantly, Iraq's neutrality formed the foundation of a new political stance towards the evolving situation in Syria.

There is no doubt that Iraq and Syria share a wide array of geographic, economic, and security-related concerns. These include

the shared border areas, which remain volatile due to the presence of residual ISIS pockets; The control exercised by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), rampant cross-border drug trafficking, and extensive smuggling operations. These issues may ultimately compel both states to seek closer alignment in managing such threats.

In addition to these factors, Iraq's religious and sectarian ties with Syria's Shia communities present an opportunity for Baghdad to play a prominent role in safeguarding Arab Shia interests and religious sites in Syria. This point was made explicitly by Prime Minister Sudani during a meeting with Arab diplomatic envoys in Baghdad on 20 December 2024, where he announced that the Iraqi embassy in Damascus would soon resume operations following consultations with Syria's new leadership. He emphasised Iraq's intention to take an active role in the Syrian scene and to contribute to rebuilding the new Syrian state.

In this context, Iraq's engagement in broader regional dialogues concerning the Syrian situation marked a significant shift in its foreign policy after Assad's fall. Iraqi diplomatic activity intensified in early 2025, starting with Sudani's visit to Jordan, followed by a visit to Iraq by former US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Iraq also participated in the meetings of the Arab Contact Group held in Aqaba, and Sudani later travelled to Saudi Arabia. These efforts reflected a maturing Iraqi political awareness of the risks that Iraq—and the wider region—

could face if the Syrian developments were not contained.

Additionally, Iraq engaged in quiet diplomacy through continuous contact with officials in Iran and Turkey to ease the growing tensions between the two countries following Assad's fall. Tehran accused Ankara of engineering what it considered a coup against the tripartite understandings established through the Astana peace talks on Syria. The Sudani government recognises that without constructive Turkish and Iranian participation in the Arab-led regional effort to stabilise Syria, there can be no lasting settlement or security.



The Coordination Framework now appears to understand that closing the door to Damascus may have more severe negative consequences for Iraq. These consequences extend beyond the question of whether al-Sharaa will lead the new Syrian government.

Security Dilemmas and the Persistence of Tense Relations

In a surprising development, Iraqi Intelligence Chief Hamid al-Shatri arrived in Damascus on December 26, 2024, marking a pivotal moment in Iraqi-Syrian relations. It signalled

Iraq's apparent intent to directly engage in Syrian affairs, primarily due to the nature of the outstanding issues between the two countries, most of which are fundamentally security-related. It was therefore logical for Iraq to initiate its new phase of relations with Syria by dispatching a high-level security delegation to Damascus.

In practical terms, Shatri is the Iraqi official most directly responsible for the Syrian file. His familiarity with President Ahmed al-Sharaa, dating back to the latter's detention in Iraq during his time as a fighter with al-Qaeda, led the Iraqi government to entrust Shatri with overseeing relations with Damascus. This was further demonstrated by his second visit to Syria on 25 April 2025, aimed at advancing the security track between the two sides.



The foremost issue Iraq must prioritise in post-Assad Syria is the threat posed by ISIS, whether through the group's active cells or its imprisoned members in Ghweiran prison in al-Hasakah, currently under SDF control.

A cursory examination of the nature of Iraqi-Syrian relations reveals that they are, without a doubt, overwhelmingly security-

centric, despite persistent efforts by both Baghdad and Damascus to move beyond this framework. Key issues include the fate of ISIS detainees in al-Hasakah's Ghweiran prison and their families in al-Hol camp, the presence of foreign fighters in Syria, large-scale cross-border smuggling operations, the drug trade, the status of border crossings—some of which are controlled by the SDF—and Israel's ongoing military escalation in Syrian territory. All of these matters are imposing themselves on the bilateral agenda. In an interview conducted on the sidelines of the Iraqi-Syrian Think Tanks Conference in Baghdad in April 2025, al-Shatri emphasised that Iraq's focus on these security files should not be interpreted as interference in Syrian internal affairs. Instead, Iraq's involvement stems from the fact that these issues directly impact its national security. He added that Iraq is committed to promoting stability and security in Syria and will support the new Syrian government to avoid chaos and fragmentation. The security incidents that erupted in Syrian coastal cities on 10 March 2025, he noted, underscore Iraq's concerns over the gravity of such threats, particularly in light of Israeli ambitions to establish an autonomous zone in southern Syria extending to the Iraqi border. Such a development would bring Israel dangerously close to Iraq's western frontier.

Shatri explained that Iraq's approach to the security file is not unilateral; Baghdad does not wish to act independently, but rather within a broader regional security vision for managing

the Syrian crisis. This is what prompted Iraq to participate in the Arab Contact Group's meetings in Aqaba in December 2024, and to join a newly established trilateral security coordination cell with Amman and Ankara. Furthermore, during his two visits to Syria, Shatri succeeded in securing an agreement with Syrian officials to develop a joint security coordination room between Baghdad and Damascus. The goal of this initiative is to counter cross-border threats and to initiate practical steps toward reopening border crossings between the two countries, which had remained closed throughout the Syrian war.

Sudani and al-Sharaa Face to Face

Qatari mediation successfully brought together Prime Minister Sudani and President al-Sharaa in the Qatari capital, marking a significant breakthrough in Iraqi-Syrian relations. This meeting coincided with Iraq's official invitation for al-Sharaa to attend the Arab League Summit held in Baghdad on 17 May 2025. Although al-Sharaa did not participate in the summit, the very act of extending an invitation signalled a clear shift in Iraq's foreign policy, indicating that it was moving beyond constraints previously imposed by internal and regional actors who had opposed any diplomatic opening towards Damascus.

Sources close to the Iraqi government described the atmosphere of the meeting as positive, noting that it significantly reduced tensions and revealed a strong mutual

interest in expanding bilateral economic and trade relations. Most importantly, the meeting helped shift the relationship from a phase of regional tug-of-war to one centred on national interests. This shift was further cemented with the formation of a joint committee tasked with overseeing the reopening of all Iraqi-Syrian border crossings. Iraq also reaffirmed its support for the reconciliation agreement between the SDF and Damascus, aimed at facilitating the reopening of crossings currently under SDF control in northeastern Syria.



Ultimately, viewing Iraq's interests through the lens of geographic inevitability necessitates proactive engagement with Syria's new political landscape, rather than confrontation.

What is particularly notable is that the Coordination Framework—a bloc that had long expressed reservations about any rapprochement with Damascus—has recently begun to exhibit a clear shift in its stance. The previous divide between supportive, opposed, and hesitant voices has largely given way to a broad consensus in favour of reopening to Syria. This change became especially apparent following the high-profile meeting between al-Sharaa and US President Donald

Trump in Riyadh during Trump's visit to the Gulf in May 2025. The Coordination Framework now appears to understand that closing the door to Damascus may have more severe negative consequences for Iraq. These consequences extend beyond the question of whether al-Sharaa will lead the new Syrian government.

Beyond Politics

The paths Iraq is currently pursuing regarding Syria are highly complex. Geography ties the two countries together, compelling Iraq to approach developments in the Syrian arena from a broad strategic perspective—one that balances Iraq's national interests with the regional risks it may face if it becomes part of the problem rather than part of the solution in post-Assad Syria.

First and foremost, it is essential to emphasise that what is happening in Syria today is a matter for the Syrian people alone. They, more than anyone else, will bear the consequences of their choices. However, Iraq has strategic interests in Syria that must be understood and addressed as part of any future planning.

Iraq now has a significant opportunity to capitalise on the threats emerging from Syria and turn them into an opening for restoring its regional influence. Yet such a vision cannot be realised without a genuine reassessment of Iraq's decision-making apparatus, both in terms of institutional processes and the actors involved. Indeed, Iraq's most significant

challenge may not be a lack of foreign policy vision, but rather its internal disarray.

The foremost issue Iraq must prioritise in post-Assad Syria is the threat posed by ISIS, whether through the group's active cells or its imprisoned members in Ghweiran prison in al-Hasakah, currently under SDF control. Although Iraq has successfully coordinated with the United States on this matter, a broader effort is needed—one involving Syria's new leadership and other regional players—to ensure this issue becomes part of a broader international security agenda rather than remaining confined to Iraqi-Syrian relations alone.

Another key concern is the SDF itself. Although Iraqi Defence Minister Thabit al-Abbasi visited Ankara on 8 May 2025 to discuss this matter with Turkish officials—especially given Turkey's ongoing military operations in northern Iraq targeting PKK forces (despite the group's recent formal dissolution)—the ties between the SDF in north of Syria and the PKK in northern Iraq pose a significant risk. Should Turkey launch a broader military campaign in the north of Syria to eliminate the Kurdish question, Iraq could suffer the most severe fallout. This risk demands urgent attention from the Iraqi government and the initiation of broad consultations with both Turkey and Syria's new governments.

Other pressing security concerns include the surge in drug trafficking and smuggling operations. Crucially, Iraq must also clarify

the status of former Syrian security personnel who crossed into Iraq, many of whom had served in Assad's army or intelligence apparatus. Large numbers of these individuals are now concentrated in Iraq's al-Jazira and Badia regions, having fled either legal prosecution or tribal reprisals. Iraq must work to contain them within designated zones or camps to prevent future instability against the emerging Syrian order. Notably, 1,950 Syrian Assad-era soldiers have already been repatriated via the al-Qa'im border crossing under an agreement with the new Syrian leadership.

Another strategic consideration is the future of Iraq's development plans. With Assad gone and Iran withdrawing from Syria—thus diminishing the prospects for completing the Iran–Iraq rail corridor—the likelihood

of realising the "Development Road" project has increased. This project, which seeks to link Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea, may now benefit from enhanced Iraqi-Syrian integration. Incorporating Syria into Iraq's regional vision will inevitably bind Syrian security to Iraqi stability. As a result, all actors involved in the Syrian dossier will come to see the preservation of Iraqi security as a strategic imperative.

Ultimately, viewing Iraq's interests through the lens of geographic inevitability necessitates proactive engagement with Syria's new political landscape, rather than confrontation. The international community will eventually recognise the new government in Damascus, and Iraq must build its future relationship with Syria on that foundation.

“ ABOUT PSI

Politics and Society Institute (PSI), is a Jordanian nonprofit, policy and research organization established to advance practical research, innovative ideas and realistic solutions toward building a more prosperous Jordan and a stable region.

The Institute is an independent organization that aims to deepen the understanding of public policy and decision-making processes and to build a better knowledge platform of domestic and regional dynamics that will define our future.

The Institute advances its mission guided by the values of the rule of law, civil society, good governance, and moderation. It provides an innovative, integrated, and global approach to its analysis of complex trends and transformations with particular attention to youth dynamics.

The Institute aims to provide practical solutions, based on up-to-date studies and research in political, economic, security, and social fields. The Institute hopes to define future trends for Jordan and the region through its analysis and projections, focusing on the impact of accelerating transformations on the politics and societies of the Middle East.

By bringing together experts and thinkers from various disciplines and regions, the institute hopes to be able to build ideas and solutions through current and relevant research and integrated analysis that can help policymakers advance national interests and build a more stable region by effectively responding to complex challenges and rapid transformations.

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