Iraq and Foreign Policy Paths Towards Post-Assad Syria

Firas Elias

مركز البيان للدراسات والتخطيط
Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning

Iraq and Foreign Policy Paths Towards Post-Assad Syria

Series of publications of Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning
/ Research Department / Political Studies

Publication / Opinion Articles

Topic / Domestic and Foreign Policy, Regional and International Affairs

Firas Elias / Researcher

Translation: Milad Alnofaly

The fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in early December has ushered in a new regional reality. Regional countries, including Iraq, have begun to assess the areas of gain and loss resulting from the collapse of Assad's regime. Historically, Iraqi-Syrian relations have been among the most complex in the region, characterized by fluctuations between conflict and cooperation. However, what is certain is that these relations have never progressed at a singular pace, particularly after Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad assumed power in their respective countries. During that period, relations between Iraq and Syria became some of the most tense in the Middle East, especially during the Iraq-Iran War in the 1980s, when Syria sided with Iran.

After the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Syria invested in post-occupation Iraq by sending dozens of militants into the country. The goal was to obstruct the US strategy in Iraq and to deter the United States from targeting Damascus and Tehran after the occupation of Baghdad, especially since the administration of former US President George W. Bush had classified Syria and Iran, along with Iraq, as part of the "Axis of Evil" in the Middle East. As a result of Syria's actions in Iraq, a major clash erupted between Syria and Iraq, particularly when former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki held Bashar al-Assad's regime responsible for the bloody bombings that occurred in Baghdad from 2007 to 2010.

However, the situation changed after 2011. The outbreak of the "Arab Spring" in Syria marked a qualitative shift in Iraqi-Syrian relations, with sectarian realities becoming the basis for reshaping ties between the two countries. Iran played a significant role in reinforcing this shift by linking the stability of Iraq's political system with the survival of Syria. The threat posed by Syrian opposition forces to the Assad regime was viewed as a threat to Iraq's political system, to the survival of the Alawites in Syria, and to the "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran in the region.

This connection prompted the Iraqi government to open the borders with Syria and send thousands of fighters, weapons, and equipment to prevent the fall of Assad's regime at the hands of opposition forces.

Many Iraqi armed factions participated in the conflict under the banner of "defending the sanctities" in Syria. These factions also sought to secure a land corridor linking with Hezbollah in Lebanon, extending from Tehran through Iraq and Syria to reach Beirut. In this context, Iraq played the role of a regional bridge, contributing to repairing the cracks in Syria's regime, which had been exhausted by the war.

The sudden fall of Assad's regime, along with the withdrawal of both Iran and Russia from Syria, left post-Assad Syria facing major challenges that might resemble those Iraq encountered after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The only difference may be that Syria today enjoys a level of regional and international engagement that Iraq did not experience in the past. What remains most important, however, is the future that awaits Iraq after the fall of the Assad regime, and how Iraq's political decision-makers will respond to this new regional variable.

The Moment of Heading to Damascus

With the success of the Syrian opposition forces in controlling Aleppo, Iraqi political positions began to gradually escalate. This escalation was mainly due to the realization of the rise of ISIS in Iraq in 2014, especially considering the previous relationship between Abu Muhammad al-Julani (Ahmed al-Sharaa), the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, with al-Qaeda first and later with ISIS. This connection likely caused confusion in the Iraqi position, due to the idea of "opening the borders" that global jihadist organizations believe in, and the potential risks being transferred to the Iraqi interior.

At a time when the Syrian opposition forces were able to control cities one after another, reaching the capital Damascus, the Iraqi government continued to send security and military reinforcements to the border with Syria. This was preceded by a clear Iraqi government position refusing to engage in the Syrian conflict, rejecting Iranian pressure and demands from the Assad regime, affirming its commitment to a neutral position towards the events in Syria, and focusing on protecting the borders while awaiting the crystallization of regional and international responses.

There are undoubtedly many reasons that prompted the Iraqi government, led by Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, to refrain from engaging in the Syrian conflict. The most prominent reason was that Iraqi intelligence assessments confirmed the inability of Assad's forces to withstand the advance of opposition forces. Al-Sudani's resolve to stay out of the conflict was further reinforced by Iran's hesitation to directly engage, despite its deep economic, military, and sectarian involvement in Syria. Moreover, the lack of consensus within the leadership of Iraq's ruling "Coordination Framework" regarding support for the Assad regime compelled al-Sudani to retreat from the idea of engagement, particularly amidst such political divisions.

Furthermore, the new political situation in Syria was influenced by regional and international forces, no longer simply driven by traditional powers like Russia and Iran. The United States also played a pivotal role in cutting off supply lines to the Assad regime and preventing any intervention that could hinder the Syrian opposition's advance towards Damascus. This reality led the Iraqi government to conclude that any uncalculated intervention in Syria or support for the Assad regime could carry very high costs for Iraq. Thus, this early assessment of the developments in Syria prompted al-Sudani to put forward several reasons for not engaging in the conflict, ultimately concluding that the Syrian opposition forces were the only victors, enjoying unprecedented regional and international support.

Iraq after Assad

It can be said that the escalating positions that began to emerge in Iraq, specifically in the first hours after the fall of the Assad regime, indicated a clear shift in Iraqi political convictions. This was reflected in the conditional recognition of the new political situation and the call for a political process that would ensure security and stability in Syria. More importantly, Iraq's adoption of a neutral position formed the basis for building a new political stance towards Syria's new political situation. There is no doubt that there are many geographical, economic, and security commonalities linking Iraq and Syria. These commonalities include the geographical borders, which are experiencing increasing tension due to the pockets still held by ISIS, the activity of the Syrian Democratic Forces, cross-border drug trade, and large-scale smuggling operations. These challenges may push both countries toward strengthening cooperation to contain these threats.

Additionally, the sectarian ties between Iraq and Syria's Shiite population provide an opportunity to activate the role of Arab Iraq in supporting Arab Shiites and their sanctities in Syria. This is not limited to opening offices concerned with this matter, but rather it necessitates reopening the Iraqi embassy in Damascus. Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani confirmed this in a meeting with heads of Arab diplomatic missions in Baghdad on December 20, where he indicated that the Iraqi embassy in Damascus would resume its work after reaching an understanding with the new leadership in Syria. Al-Sudani also stressed the importance of Iraq playing an active role in the Syrian scene and contributing to the reconstruction of the new state. With expectations of escalating regional competition in Damascus in the coming days for a place at the economic investment table, Iraq, if it wants to remain an active state in the region, must be among the first to engage in Damascus.

In this context, Iraq's involvement in broad regional dialogues to effectively address the developments in Syria marked an important shift in Iraqi political behavior after the fall of Assad. Iraqi diplomatic moves in mid-December indicated a mature political awareness of the challenges Iraq and the region may face if the situation in Syria is not contained. These moves began with Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's visit to Jordan, followed by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to Iraq, then Iraq's participation in the Arab Contact Group meetings in Aqaba, and finally Al-Sudani's visit to Saudi Arabia. Iraq also made unannounced moves through continuous communication with officials in Iran and Turkey, aiming to calm the tense atmosphere between the two countries after Assad's fall. Iran held Turkey responsible for what happened in Syria, considering it a Turkish coup against the tripartite understandings of the Astana talks on the Syrian issue. Al-Sudani's government realizes that without Iranian and Turkish support for the Arab regional effort in post-Assad Syria, there will be no stability in Syria.

Beyond Politics

The paths through which Iraq is moving today towards Syria are very complex, as there is a geographical inevitability between the two countries. This geographical inevitability requires us to deal with what is happening in the Syrian arena from a general strategic perspective, balancing Iraq's interests and the strategic risks it could face if it becomes part of the problem, rather than part of the solution in the new Syria.

First, it is important to point out that what is happening in the Syrian arena today is the choice of the Syrians alone, and therefore, they, before anyone else, will bear the consequences of their choice. What is crucial here is that Iraq has needs in Syria, which require a clear understanding of how to deal with them and build upon them in the next stage.

It can be said that Iraq today has a great opportunity to transform the threats emanating from the Syrian arena into an opportunity, through which it can recreate an effective Iraqi regional role. However, such a vision will not be achieved without a real review of the decision-making perceptions in Iraq, whether at the level of the decision-making system or the active and influential parties in decision-making. The biggest problem facing Iraq lies within Iraq itself, not in the absence of a vision or policy at the level of foreign policy.

The first issue that should concern Iraq in post-Assad Syria is the issue of ISIS, whether it pertains to the movements of this organization's elements or the organization's prisoners in the Gweiran prison in Hasakah, controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Despite Iraq's success in coordinating with the American side in this regard, broader coordination with the new leadership in Syria is required in order to control this issue and make it a regional and international security concern. This would involve integrating more than one party into this file, and not making it an exclusive matter in Iraqi-Syrian relations.

Another issue is the Syrian Democratic Forces card. Despite the visit of Iraqi Minister of Defense Thabet Al-Abbasi to Ankara earlier this month to discuss with the Turkish side the repercussions of this card on Iraq, especially as Turkey is currently conducting a military operation in northern Iraq targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the organic alliance between the Syrian Democratic Forces in northern Syria and the PKK in northern Iraq may lead to the transfer of threats from the Syrian Democratic Forces to northern Iraq. Especially if Turkey carries out a large-scale military operation in northern Syria, and the Syrian opposition forces succeed in advancing toward Hasakah and Raqqa, which are controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, with the aim of neutralizing the Kurdish card. This would mean that Iraq will be the most affected, and therefore it requires an urgent Iraqi understanding of this problem, along with extensive dialogues with Turkey and the new leadership in Syria.

In addition to other urgent security issues, such as the risks of escalating drug trafficking and smuggling, there must be a clear understanding regarding the number of Syrian security elements that entered Iraq from Syria. Most of these elements were affiliated with the Syrian regime's army, along with intelligence and party affiliates. The Al-Jazeera regions in northern Iraq are witnessing the entry of many of them, escaping security and judicial accountability or tribal revenge. Therefore, Iraq must confine them to specific areas or camps so that they do not constitute a security threat or become a tool for undermining the new reality in Syria. More importantly, there must be joint Iraqi-Syrian coordination to settle their situation and return them to Syria, as 1,950 Syrian soldiers were recently returned through the Al-Qaim border crossing after an agreement with the new Syrian leadership.

Another critical point is that after the fall of the Assad regime, Iran's withdrawal from Syria, and the complexity of linking railways with Iran, the opportunity for the "Development Road Project" to materialize has significantly increased, especially by linking this road to the Mediterranean Sea. This prompts us to say that there is a great opportunity to push Iraqi-Syrian relations forward significantly. Integrating the new Syria into Iraq's regional vision will make Syrian security, in one way or another, linked to Iraqi security. In fact, all countries active in Syrian affairs will find that maintaining Iraqi security is essential due to the direct relationship between the two countries at all levels, not just political.

Looking at Iraq's interests from the perspective of the geographical inevitability created by the Iraqi-Syrian neighborhood, it is essential for Iraq to interact with the political situation in Syria, not to clash with it because the international community will sooner or later recognize this. This is the path upon which future Iraqi-Syrian relations should be built.

For an Active state and a participating society