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# Iraqi-Syrian Relations A Century Fraught with Turmoil

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● **Analyses**

## **Iraqi-Syrian Relations: A Century Fraught with Turmoil**

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### About

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## Introduction

The features of the first frictions between the Iraqi and Syrian entities emerged after their crystallization under the “Sykes-Picot scalpel” in 1916, following Sharif Hussein’s declaration of the revolt against the Ottomans with British support and backing. This action would ultimately lead to the installation of Faisal bin Al-Hussein as King of Syria.

In the wake of the defeat of Faisal’s forces by French forces at the Battle of Maysalun in July 1920, Faisal headed to Palestine, from there to Britain, and then to Iraq, where he was installed as king in 1921, ruling until his death in 1933.

During the era of the Regent Abd al-Ilah, which extended until Abdul Karim Qasim’s coup in 1958, two attempts were made within the context of the “Fertile Crescent” project championed by the Hashemite throne in Iraq, which aimed to establish a Syrian-Iraqi unity that could form the first building block of this project. The first was represented by Sami al-Hinnawi’s coup against Husni al-Za’im on August 14, 1949, which ended with Adib Shishakli’s coup late that same year.

As for the second attempt, which was not destined to see the light of day, officer Muhammad Ma'rouf—who held unionist inclinations toward Iraq and was a collaborator in several Syrian coups—mentions that: “The date for executing the coup against the rule of Shukri al-Quwatli was set for October 31, 1956, but the outbreak of the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt (on October 29 of the same year) prompted us to postpone the operation indefinitely.”<sup>1</sup>

With this latter event, it can be said that the chapter of the “Fertile Crescent” project was completely closed for several reasons. Most prominent among these was the meteoric rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s star in the wake of the outcomes of the aggression, which ultimately led to the demise of the French and British empires, the perpetrators of the aggression alongside Israel. Consequently, confrontation with Abdel Nasser became a form of illusion, or a departure from political realism at best.

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1. Days I Lived... Military Coups and Their Secrets in Syria, Muhammad Ma'rouf, Riad El-Rayyes Books and Publishing, 2003.

## **The Ba'ath Era: Ideology Unites but It Divides as Well**

The beginning of 1963 witnessed two events that were bound to provide an opportunity to return to paths of convergence between the two countries anew. The first was in February, which witnessed the Iraqi Ba'ath Party's ascension to power in Baghdad, preceding its Syrian counterpart by about a month in reaching power in Damascus. However, the shared ideology failed to bring about major convergences due to the developments and policies pursued by both sides toward it.

With the crossing of Syrian troops into the town of Masnaa toward Lebanon on June 1, 1976, Damascus was poised for the growth of its role, which flared up for the first time since the establishment of the Umayyad state there in 750 AD.<sup>2</sup> This aroused Baghdad's resentment and pushed it toward supporting the "Muslim Brotherhood" organization, which began its rebellion against the Damascus regime in 1977. In the meantime, Baghdad sought to use the unity negotiations, which followed Egypt's exit from the Arab-Israeli conflict from that year onward, as a means to

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2. Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East, Patrick Seale, 1st edition, 1988.

contain the rising Syrian ambition.

The minutes of the sessions reveal that there was an inclination on the part of the Iraqi Vice President at the time, Saddam Hussein, to establish a state extending from Latakia to Basra;<sup>3</sup> however, what caused him to retreat from that ambition was the outbreak of war on the Iraqi-Iranian front in September 1980,<sup>4</sup> as this latter event also led to Baghdad becoming preoccupied away from supporting the “Muslim Brotherhood” organization after nearly three years of actively doing so.<sup>5</sup>

In subsequent phases, the divergences became larger and wider in scope, depending on differing positions and perspectives on events whose interactions intensified in the region between 1989 and 2000. Thus, the divergence occurred in the “Lebanese Taif,” which came through a

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3. “Retrospective Reflections on Syrian Events 1979-1980,” Mohammad Sayyed Rassas, Al-Hewar Al-Mutamaddin, March 12, 2005, available at: <https://ahewar.net/m/s.asp?aid=33419>

.Ibid

5. “Witness to the Age” program, Al Jazeera, November 4, 2012, interview with Adnan Saad al-Din, General Supervisor of the Muslim Brotherhood, in which he stated that “weapons were secured by the Iraqis” and that “the Iraqis were generous with weapons.” He added that the Iraqi regime provided “240 vehicles loaded with light and medium weapons that entered through several crossings along the Syrian-Iraqi border, which extends for more than 700 km.”

Syrian-Saudi consensus endorsed by America, and in the “Kuwaiti Taif,” which in 1990 witnessed the formation of the provisional Kuwaiti government shortly after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August of that year.

The same was repeated following Damascus’s declaration that “peace is its strategic choice,” which came after the convening of the Madrid “Peace” Conference in October 1991. It can be said that holding that conference was akin to a consolation prize for the countries participating in the liberation of Kuwait within the framework of the “International Coalition” announced by Washington weeks after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait.

### **The Relationship in the Era of Assad the Son: The Ba’ath Is No Longer a Valid Ideology**

The strategic vision of Assad the son held that “the Ba’ath ideology is no longer valid for governing the country-Syria-nor for governing Iraq either.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, his view was that the relationship between the two countries “must be based on economic benefit,” which could

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6. Assad Between Departure and Systematic Destruction, Sami Kleib... A series of interviews conducted by the author with former President Bashar al-Assad between 2001 and 2012.

“distance it from the discord that prevailed over that relationship throughout the past decades.”

As clouds gathered in the skies of Baghdad from mid-2002 onward, portending major shifts in its climate, Damascus began to sense the danger looming over it, for which Baghdad might be merely the first stop. In oral history, it is mentioned that a report was placed on Assad’s desk after the fall of Baghdad on April 9, 2003, stating that “the stopping of American tanks at the Baghdad station is nothing more than the rest stop taken by long-distance coaches (pullmans) in the city of Homs during their journey from Latakia to Damascus, and vice versa.”

### **The Colin Powell - Assad Meeting**

Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State, landed in Damascus on May 3, 2003—about three weeks after the fall of Baghdad—carrying 33 demands that he placed on Assad’s table when he met him at the People’s Palace in Damascus that morning,<sup>7</sup> stating that these were Washington’s demands and hinting that their implementation was the guarantee against a repetition of the Iraqi scenario in Syria.

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7. Lebanese Al-Safir Newspaper, May 4, 2003.

According to what was written by Abdel Halim Khaddam, the Syrian Vice President until his defection from the regime in December 2005, the most important elements of the American demands focused on Syria's non-interference in Iraq's affairs, not receiving members of the former Iraqi leadership, not obstructing the "Roadmap" (on the Palestinian track), closing the offices of Palestinian organizations opposed to the Oslo course (the Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements, as well as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command), and withdrawing from Lebanon.<sup>8</sup>

Although Assad had sensed the danger inherent in many of these demands, on the grounds that they aimed to "clip Syria's wings" and force Damascus to retreat behind its borders-which could have repercussions similar to what happened to the Soviet Union following its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989-Assad nonetheless "expressed his satisfaction with that visit," but added: "These are American demands, but where are Damascus's interests?"

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8. "Details of the Famous Meeting Between Colin Powell and Bashar al-Assad in Damascus 2003," Independent Arabia, available at: <https://is.gd/H53AXT>.



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