

## **Damascus Appoints Iraq Ambassador**

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Syria this week restored diplomatic ties with Iraq and appointed its first ambassador to Baghdad in nearly three decades, but local analysts say relations between the two countries will not automatically improve.

The Syrian government named Nawaf Fares, a senior Baath party figure and political leader, as ambassador to Iraq on September 16.

Fares will be the first Syrian ambassador in Baghdad since the Eighties, when Damascus backed Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war.

Syria has enjoyed better relations with Iraq in the past few years, although its alleged support of insurgents fighting the United States military and Iraqi government forces has been a key sticking point. The Syrians deny backing insurgency and terrorism.

Security and border issues are likely to be high on Iraq's agenda as it seeks to tighten control of its frontier with Syria.

One Damascus-based political analyst argued that the appointment was uncontroversial because Iran is now an ally of both Syria and Iraq, but he added that simply having diplomatic ties "does not mean the relationship between the countries will change".

"The problem is Syria's position and its behaviour towards Iraq in practice, such as supporting some armed Sunni groups and allowing militants to infiltrate through Syria's borders," he said. "That will be the real test of the relationship between the two countries."

There are many other issues to be discussed, such as the 1.5 Iraqi million refugees in Syria, as well as oil deals and economic agreements which could boost the Syrian economy.

As Syria faces depleting oil reserves, it is looking to Iraq as a potential supplier. The two countries agreed last month to reopen a pipeline that ran through Syria during Saddam Hussein's regime, according to a report in the Iraqi newspaper Al-Zaman.

Analysts said the appointment of an envoy was strategically timed.

"It's not a sudden decision for the Syrian government, which is making tactical calculations," said Ahmed Matouq, secretary-general of the Syrian-based Iraqi People's Support Committee, which opposes the US occupation of Iraq.

Damascus, he said, "wants to rearrange its cards and relations internationally and within the Arab world".

In making the decision, Damascus has to balance its opposition in principle to the US military presence in Iraq against the pragmatic need for diplomatic relations.

Some analysts in Damascus believe the US is behind the drive to get Arab states to send ambassadors to Baghdad to show that security is improving.

Citing sources in Damascus, the Gulf News website reported that Fares will go to Baghdad shortly before US president George Bush's term expires, to demonstrate that Syria's relations with Iraq are not subject to US influence.

While the level of violence has fallen, many Syrians are sceptical that the conflict is over.

"The security situation in Iraq is unstable," said Haitham Al-Maleh, a prominent Syrian lawyer and activist.

"We're not certain whether the return of the Syrian ambassador will satisfy all parties [in Iraq] and what might come out of it," he added. "But relations between Arab countries are determined by interests rather than ethics".

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists.)

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