

Iraq Hopes Arab Summit Will Boost Its Role

Author: [Abeer Mohammed](#)

Event seen as key moment for Baghdad as regional player following US withdrawal in December 2011.

Iraqi officials are hoping that hosting the first Arab League summit after the wave of revolutions that swept through the Middle East and North Africa will increase their country's standing in the region.

"It is very important for Iraq to host this particular summit at this particular time," Ali al-Mosawi, a media advisor to the Iraqi government, said. He noted that this meeting would see "some officials meet others for the first time" – a reference to new leaders who have emerged from revolutions in Arab states over the last year.

Mosawi said the three-day forum in Baghdad, starting March 29, would discuss the continuing unrest in Syria and Bahrain, and Palestinian issues. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has not been invited.

The agenda also includes restructuring the Arab League itself, after criticism of the way it has acted over the last year.

"Its hierarchy will be reviewed for the first time since it was established more than 50 years ago," Mosawi said.

For Iraq, the meeting – especially coming at such crucial moment for the region – presents an opportunity to bolster its relations with the rest of the Arab world.

Baghdad was due to host the event last year, but unrest in several Arab League member states, combined with security concerns in Iraq itself, led to its postponement.

"If Iraq had held the summit last year, most Arab leaders would not have attended," Osama Murtadha, a professor of political science in Baghdad, said. "Those hostile to Iraq would have stayed away on the pretext that it was an occupied country, and those friendly towards Iraq would also have been unable to attend because they would have faced harsh public criticism for attending a meeting in an occupied country. Simply put, Arabs would have said, 'How can we discuss our affairs in a country run by foreigners?'"

Iraq has not hosted an Arab League summit since May 1990, months before its then leader Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, an act which alienated the country from many other Arab states.

"This meeting will help us activate our relations with the Arab countries," Mosawi said, adding, "There has been a disconnect stemming from Saddam Hussein's poor policies, starting with his invasion of Kuwait."

After Saddam was toppled in the United States-led invasion of 2003, Iraqis felt further isolated because many other Arab states saw them as being under occupation. With the American troop withdrawal in December 2011, Iraq is hoping to reposition itself as a leading player in the region.

Ahead of the summit, Baghdad has stepped up diplomatic efforts with other states.

The government paid four billion US dollars in compensation to Kuwait last year, and says it is committed to solving other controversial issues like the demarcation of borders with its southern neighbour. It also recently agreed to pay some 408 million dollars to around 640,000 Egyptians who fled Iraq following the first Gulf war.

The warming of relations with Saudi Arabia have been marked by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's declared willingness to visit the country, and the appointment of the Saudi envoy to Jordan to serve as non-resident ambassador to Baghdad. It is the first time there has been Saudi representation in Iraq for more than two decades.

These efforts appear to be paying dividends, as 11 Arab heads of state, including the emir of Kuwait, have already confirmed they will be attending the summit, according to the Iraqi foreign ministry.

Guaranteeing security for such a high-profile event remains a major challenge,

Iraqi leaders have assured delegates that tightened security measures will be in place ahead of and during the summit. Militant attacks still plague the country, and 150 people were killed last month, according to official figures.

Maliki has called on the security forces to improve their working methods and fill any gaps in security in

order to “foil the efforts of terrorists”, according to a statement from his office.

The security plan involves deploying thousands of military forces around the capital, shutting down Baghdad's airspace during the meeting and probably imposing a ban on vehicle movement in the capital.

Experts warn that any diplomatic gains from holding the event in Baghdad would be negated by a serious attack.

“Any breach would send the message that Iraq was a weak country, unable to protect itself without the Americans,” Abdullah al-Kassab, an Iraqi writer and analyst, said. “Overall, it would show up Iraq as irresponsible for endangering the lives of its guests – a stain on its reputation in Arab eyes.”

Mosawi insisted the authorities would prevent this happening, saying, “We are ready and it will be held here.”

Abeer Mohammad is IWPR editor for Iraq.

Topic: [Diplomacy](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/iraq-hopes-arab-summit-will-boost-its-role>