

Syria Sees Iraq-US Pact as Threat

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Syrian officials and academics argue that the recently endorsed agreement between the United States and the Iraqi government on the future status of the international military presence there is a risk to Syria's security.

Damascus is worried that the agreement will open the way for Iraq and the US to launch attacks on Syrian territory as part of their fight against Iraqi militant groups.

In September, the US carried an air strike on a Syrian village along the border with Iraq, killing eight civilians, according to the government in Damascus. US officials said they targeted a key al-Qaeda figure who they believed was engaged in smuggling insurgents into Iraq.

"The American presence in Iraq, whether permanent or temporary, threatens Syrian security," said Syrian vice-president Farouq al-Shara in a recent address to political party members in Damascus.

Earlier in November, President Bashar al-Assad openly criticised the US-Iraqi security pact in a speech in Damascus. The deal, he said, would turn "Iraq into a launch pad for attacking its neighbours instead of supporting them."

Under the security pact, US-led coalition combat forces will leave Iraq completely by the end of 2011. The document also includes a strategic framework for the future of American-Iraqi relations.

The agreement received final approval from Iraq's three-person presidency council on December 4, after having been ratified earlier by the Iraqi parliament.

One clause stipulates that "in the case of any internal or external threat... the United States shall take appropriate measures including diplomatic, economic, or military measures, or any other measure to deter such threat." The same clause states that such action would be generated at the request of the Iraqi government and would take place according to "mutual agreement" between the two countries.

"The principle of self-defence in the pact... is a loose one," commented Fadhil al-Rubai, an Iraqi writer and political analyst based in Damascus. "It allows America to turn Iraq into a base for aggression against all the neighbouring countries - above all Syria - under the pretext of self-defence."

Following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, US-Syrian relations deteriorated as Washington accused Damascus of allowing militants to infiltrate Iraq.

With the exception of the strike in September and few other similar attacks, US forces have largely refrained from pursuing insurgents outside Iraqi territory in the past five years.

Following the latest US attack on Syria, Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari visited Damascus in mid November to give Assad guarantees that Syrian sovereignty would be respected.

Despite its discontent, Damascus apparently refrained from an all-out, high-level rejection of the agreement.

On the day the pact was ratified in Bagdad, a number of Syrian lawyers suspended work on court cases for an hour to mark their objection to the agreement. Iraqi opposition groups in Syria staged a protest against the agreement in Damascus on December 2.

But a large gathering of Iraqi opposition figures and intellectuals scheduled to take place in Damascus last week to voice protest against the agreement was cancelled under unclear circumstances.

An Iraqi opposition figure based in Damascus who was supposed to attend the gathering said it was cancelled by the Syrian authorities, who wanted to tone down their criticism in order to prepare the way for opening channels of communication with the US once Barack Obama takes office as president.

The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that once the US administration was in place, the Syrians hoped to negotiate a new regional security deal that would benefit them.

However, another analyst said the re-appointment of Robert Gates as US defence secretary had not reassured Syria.

“The Iraqi government owes total allegiance to the Americans... It is the US that makes the decisions for war and peace in the Middle East,” said the analyst, who wished to remain anonymous. “Syria will always be under threat as long as the US continue to wage its war on terror in the current manner.”

Observers say that irrespective of the security agreement, the US will continue to dictate policy in the region by maintaining a strong diplomatic presence in Iraq.

“The continued US presence in the region, with what Newsweek magazine says is the largest embassy in the world [in Baghdad], means... it will interfere in all of the region’s affairs,” said Jasim Zakariya, a Syrian political analyst.

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

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