



December 2010

## In the Middle of the Middle East

By Dalia Haidar & Claire Duffett

Photo Fadi al-Hamwi

Over the past year, Syria has taken on a more central role in the region. How will it balance its many relationships?



Regional politics kept Syria's politicians busy this year. The Middle Eastern issues and events in 2010 in which Syria played a key role are as numerous as they are varied. Key among them was the boost in Saudi-Syria ties, improved relationships between Syria and the region's most volatile countries – Lebanon and Iraq – the emergence of disparate Syrian and Iranian interests in Iraq and the growing effects of Turkey's rising regional political and economic influence.

### Reconciliation with Lebanon

Syria's relationship with Lebanon improved significantly this year. Relations between Syria and some Lebanese factions had been tense since they, along with the majority of the international community, accused Syria of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri – a charge Damascus denies.

Mazen Bilal, a Syrian political analyst and editor-in-chief of Al-Ghad, a Syrian news website, emphasised that the Hariri assassination also altered regional dynamics more broadly than on the Syrian-Lebanese level. The incident led to Syria's international isolation and rising tension between Syria and Saudi Arabia, which coincided with growing Turkish and Iranian influence in the region.

However, entering into 2010, Hariri's son and Lebanon's current Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri began engaging with Damascus, which he too had accused of his father's killing. The rapprochement began with Hariri's first trip as premier to the Syrian capital in December 2009. The period of appeasement culminated in September when Hariri publicly described the accusations he and others had made against Damascus as "politicised". This came seven months after Lebanese political leader and longtime Syria foe Walid Jumblatt apologised to Syria for making the same accusation regarding Hariri. These announcements symbolised a major shift in the countries' relations, analysts said.

"The apology to Syria on the Hariri assassination led to a rebalancing of the relationship between

Damascus and Beirut," Bilal said.

#### Arab camaraderie

Damascus and Riyadh reached out to one another in 2010 in an effort to create an Arab consensus that would stabilise and influence politics in both Lebanon and Iraq. In July, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz made a joint visit to Beirut, where they emphasised Arab unity in an attempt to mitigate tensions brewing in the Lebanese government between Hariri's pro-Western Future Movement and resistance group Hezbollah. Despite Syria's attempts to bridge divisions between the two, analysts said a rocky road lies ahead, with potential indictments looming in the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon, tasked with prosecuting those responsible for the elder Hariri's death.

In November, the tension diffused by the Assad-Abdullah visit resurfaced as anonymous sources inside the special tribunal indicated that Hezbollah officials would be accused of the assassination. As a staunch Hezbollah ally, analysts said Syria could be drawn into this dispute.

"Syria sees the tribunal as an internal Lebanese affair," Ziad Haidar, a Syrian correspondent for the Lebanese daily *As-Safir*, said. "Nevertheless, it has expressed its position that such a politicised institution could seriously harm Lebanon's stability."

#### Upholding Iraq

Syria is navigating a similarly complex situation in Iraq.

In November, Iraqi leaders formed a cabinet led by incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki after months of deadlock. The breakthrough came just weeks after Maliki completed a Middle Eastern tour to bolster support for his premiership. As part of this trip, Maliki visited Syria for the first time since he accused Damascus of harbouring those responsible for a series of bombings in Baghdad in August 2009. Maliki also visited Iran, where President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad formally endorsed Maliki's bid for the position.

Though the party of Maliki's rival, Iyad Allawi, narrowly beat the former's Da'wa coalition in the March elections, the boost in regional support from Damascus and Tehran gave Maliki the final push he needed to broker an agreement allowing him to retain the position of prime minister, analysts said. Syria, with Saudi Arabia, led diplomatic efforts to increase Arab support for the formation of an Iraqi government.

"In the last few years Syria has put a lot of effort into convincing major Arab countries to work with Damascus to strengthen the Arab influence on Iraq," Haidar said.

#### Divergent interests with Iran

Though the Syrian-Iranian bond remains strong – as highlighted by the abolition of visas between the countries this year – their disparate stances towards the future government in Iraq underscored their conflicting objectives

While Syria and most other countries with an interest in Iraq supported a non-sectarian government to represent the country's various ethnic and religious groups, Iran openly backed a Shia-dominated government led by Maliki's bloc.

"This is not an organic relationship, but a negotiated and rather fluid alliance," Peter Harling, a Middle East analyst at the International Crisis Group, said of the Syria-Iran friendship.

Although both Iran and Syria claim to want a unified, stable Iraq, recent Iranian moves to bolster Shia power in Iraq suggest Tehran may support a federalist model for its war-torn neighbour. This would mean dividing Iraq into independent or semi-independent Sunni, Shia and Kurdish states. The result could destabilise all of Iraq's neighbours if sectarian sentiments were to spill over the borders.

"If Iran is working toward a federal and sectarian solution in Iraq, this may be the red line between Iranian and Syrian interests," Carsten Wieland, a German political analyst and former research fellow at

Georgetown University who has written two books on Syria, said. Syria is concerned about "the rise of instability and Islamism and the danger of Kurdish aspirations [in Iraq] for independence", he added.

While Iranian influence grows regionally, Saudi Arabia simultaneously sought to increase Arab influence throughout the Middle East. Classified US documents released to the media by Wikileaks in late November reported a Saudi Arabia request to the US that it bomb Iran before the latter could develop nuclear capabilities. The revelation revealed the level of animosity between these two regional powers. Recent Saudi moves to improve relations with Syria during the past year indicated that the kingdom sees Damascus as key to its goal of establishing an influential, Arab bloc.

"Saudi Arabia needs Syria to foster the Arab camp because it fears increasing Iranian and Shia influence in the region, including the Arabian Peninsula," Wieland said. "Syria, and perhaps Turkey, are the countries most able to influence Iran."

#### Turkish transition

Turkey has the power to influence Iran just as it has the power to influence every state in the region – and this power increased in 2010.

Turkey took a strong stance – demanding an apology and compensation – after nine Turkish aid workers were killed during the Israeli attack on a ship headed for Gaza in May. This gave it hero status throughout the Muslim world. The country's fierce economic power and ties to the West make good relations