

Syria lifts visa restrictions on Iraqis

Syria lifted visa restrictions on Iraqi nationals on Tuesday in a sign of improving ties between the two neighbours

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Damascus: Syria lifted visa restrictions on Iraqi nationals on Tuesday in a sign of improving ties between the two neighbours after political disputes curbed border movement.

Syria's official news agency said a cabinet decision will make it possible from February 1 for any Iraqi to apply for visa at border points, instead of from the Syrian embassy in Baghdad.

Visa rules imposed in 2007 limited visas to Iraqi merchants and academics, making it difficult for other Iraqis fleeing violence in their homeland to go to Syria.

Syria, which has a 600-km border with Iraq, received hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees following the U.S. invasion that removed Saddam Hussein from power in 2003 and ushered in sectarian strife.

Iraq withdrew its ambassador from Syria in 2009 after Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki accused Damascus of sheltering two people he said were behind bomb attacks in Baghdad that killed 100 people. Syria reciprocated immediately.

Relations between the two countries improved last year and the two governments agreed to restore ambassadors to each other's capital in September.

Syrian Prime Minister Naji Al Otari discussed the visa issue during a visit to Baghdad this month. The Syrian and Iraqi side also talked about the possibility of building a 56-inch gas pipeline from Iran to Syria via Iraq.