

THE “COMEBACK” OF SYRIA TO THE ARAB WORLD

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Nearly eight years into the war in Syria, Assad's government forces supported by Russia , Iran and Hezbollah have regained control of the majority of Syria. As the war in Syria appears to wind down, there are many diplomatic efforts made by the Assad regime and Arab countries to normalize relations.

The victory of the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, the Russian regional influence, the withdrawal of the U.S forces from Syria, the Iranian threat and the weakness of the Arab Sunni alliance, are the main reasons that led Arab countries to improve relations with the Assad regime.

The visit of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in Damascus in December 2018, the first Arab head of state to visit Damascus since the start of the Syrian conflict, the reopening of the UAE's embassy in Damascus on December 27, 2018 and the first Syrian passenger flight to Tunisia since 2011 and the opening of the border crossing between Syria and Jordan, in October 2018 are part of the efforts to improve relations.

Following Assad's deadly use of military force against the opposition in his country, Arab countries had sanctioned Damascus, expelled Syria from the Arab League and most of the Arab countries backed opposition fighters in Syria.¹

Eight years later the majority of the Arab League's members, want Syria to be readmitted, into the Arab League .The next summit of the Arab League is due in Tunis in March 2019.²

Sudan - Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir visited his Syrian counterpart President Bashar Al-Assad in Damascus on December 17, 2018, becoming the first Arab leader to visit the country since the conflict broke out in 2011. Al-Bashir hosted at the presidential palace, where the two heads of state reportedly discussed strengthening bilateral relations and the latest developments in Syria and the region.³

The UAE - the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus on December 27, 2018. The UAE closed the embassy in the early stages of the Syria conflict, which started in 2011, and backed rebel groups against President Bashar Al-Assad's forces. ⁴

The UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, said that the UAE wanted to boost the "Arab role in supporting the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab

Republic. The UAE decision...came after a conviction that the next stage requires the Arab presence and communication in the Syrian file." He added that initiating communication with Damascus will not leave the region open to Iranian interference.⁵

UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan told reporters on March 6, 2019, during a joint press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, during his visit to the emirate that: "We have worked with our Russian brothers and others to discuss the containment of the crisis but to also contain Syria. When we say containment, we are talking about Syria being a part of the Arab region; being part of the Arab countries and efforts. Unfortunately, we are now seeing Syria far from that".⁶

"We believe that we are still at the beginning of this march but this requires joint efforts from Damascus and Arab parties to work together. We are still far from this situation but I believe there are an intention, and a desire, but it still requires much work from different parties," he said.⁷

Egypt - the Syrian National Security chief Maj. Gen. Ali Mamlouk traveled to Egypt in December 2018, at the invitation of Egyptian intelligence chief.⁸ This was not Mamlouk's first public visit to Egypt. During another publicized trip in 2016, Mamlouk and Egyptian intelligence officers agreed to coordinate political positions and strengthen cooperation in fighting terrorism.

Syria has been expelled from the Arab League and boycotted by its neighbors since its civil war erupted in 2011. But Egypt has maintained security contacts with Assad's government throughout, negotiating limited conciliation deals between Syrian armed groups and the Syrian government.

Egyptian president Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi, said in 2017 that he is prepared to help the Syrian army because it's a national one, as opposed to militias. And in contrast with Saudi Arabia's position, Egypt voted at the UN in favor of a Russian resolution proposal that ruled out condemning Syria.⁹ Egypt would prefer that Syria stay within the League. Expelling it did nothing to change Assad's policy, Iran grew stronger against the Arab coalition, and Turkey became the proprietor of the northern part of the country.¹⁰

Tunisia - a flight from Damascus landed in Tunisia's Habib Bourguiba Airport on December 27, 2018, marking the first direct flight between the two countries since the outbreak of Syria's civil war eight years ago. Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, had supported the Syrian opposition when the war broke out after peaceful protests were brutally repressed by the regime. But relations have warmed as the fighting winds down, with the Syrian government once again in control of most of the country, thanks largely to Russian assistance.¹¹

Iraq - Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohamed Alhakim said his country supports efforts to restore Syria's membership in the Arab League. Iraq has never cut ties with Syrian President Bashar Assad's government after its crackdown against anti-government demonstrations in 2011 led to civil war.

Jordan - the Nassib border crossing between Jordan and Syria officially opened in October 2018 to civilians and trade for the first time since it was closed in 2015.

Oman – the Syrian premier praised Oman's decision to maintain ties with Damascus despite the conflict. The statement came as the Syrian and Omani foreign ministers met in the Syrian capital to discuss ideas for ending the seven-year war.¹²

Bahrain - the Syrian foreign minister and his Bahraini counterpart had also turned heads in September 2018, after they greeted each other with a hug on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.¹³

Syria and the Arab League and the Arab Parliamentary Union

Syria was expelled from the League and other Arab institutions in 2011 following its brutal suppression of the uprising against the Bashar Al-Assad regime. In 2018, several member states have called for it to be reinstated with Russia also backing the initiative.

Syria attended a meeting of Arab states on March 3, 2019, for the first time since its conflict broke out in 2011. Syria's parliament speaker, Hammouda Sabbagh, travelled to Amman to attend the 29th Conference of the Arab Parliamentary Union. His Jordanian counterpart, Atef al-Tarawneh, called in a speech for regional countries "to work toward a political settlement to the Syrian crisis... and for Syria to regain its place" in the Arab world.¹⁴

Another event is an Arab League summit to be held in Tunis on March 31, 2019. The gathering, according to, Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi, can offer an opportunity to "strengthen Arab unity" and could also lead to Syria's return to the Arab League.¹⁵

Russia has called on the Arab League to restore Syria's membership into the organization:

- In February 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that "leaving Damascus out of the Arab League is not helping the peace efforts." Lavrov added that the League would take a more important and more active role if Syria were a member.¹⁶
- In December 2018: Colonel General Mikhail Mizintsev, from Moscow's National Centre for Defense Management, said that "The restoration of Syria's position on the global scene, in particular its membership in the League of Arab States is an extremely important issue. It will serve as a convincing signal for the international community about the return of the country to peaceful life and the promotion of the process of the political settlement of the crisis, as well as push the refugees toward making positive decisions on the return to their homes."¹⁷

Unlike other Arab countries, during a joint conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Riyadh, on March 4, 2019, the Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir, said it is premature to determine the return of Syria to the Arab League. When asked about the Kingdom re-opening its embassy in Damascus, al-Jubeir said that this was also early to determine. Al-Jubeir stressed that both Riyadh and Moscow agree to Syria's sovereignty and the need for a political solution to help Syria build a better future.¹⁸

International sanctions on Assad regime in Syria

The US, the EU, the UN, and several other regulatory entities imposed sanctions on Assad regime in Syria in response to the Syrian government's support of international terrorism and violations against democratic and human rights in the country. Since first being implemented, the sanctions have been strengthened several times due to escalating violence in the region.¹⁹ Currently imposed sanctions include Sanctions against persons & entities, (travel bans and asset freezes on certain Syrian officials), Sanctions in relation to Syrian crude oil, petroleum products and jet fuel, Sanctions in relation to arms, sanctions in relations to certain chemicals and equipment used for internal repression, A ban on Syrian investment by US persons.

The European Union – sanctions have been in force since December 1, 2011, and are subjected to annual review. The sanctions include a blacklist of Syrian officials for their role in President Bashar Assad's "violent repression" of civilians. Other bloc of sanctions including an embargo on Syrian oil, investment restrictions, and a freeze on Syrian central bank assets within the European Union.

They also cover export restrictions on equipment and technology that Damascus could use to repress its people as well as those it could use to monitor or intercept Internet or telephone calls.²⁰

The EU countries, on March 5, 2019, added Syria's interior minister and six other ministers to a sanctions blacklist. With the additions, there are 277 people under EU sanctions for their role in the "violent repression" of civilians in Syria and for their links to the Assad regime. The EU has also frozen the assets of some 72 entities.²¹

Summary

As the war in Syria appears to wind down, there are many diplomatic efforts made by the Assad regime and Arab and Western delegations to prepare for the reopening of diplomatic missions, marking a significant diplomatic boost for President Al-Assad.

Since 2018, Syria making steps towards the country's political reintegration into the region and in October 2018, President Al-Assad said that Syria had reached a "major understanding" with Arab states after years of hostility.

The Arab League is set to meet in Tunisia in March 2019, with some member states calling for Syria's return to the Arab League which suspended the country's membership in November 2011 as the death toll mounted in its war. The Arab League's secretary-general, veteran Egyptian diplomat Ahmed Aboul Gheit, said in April 2018, that the decision to suspend Syria had been "hasty".

During the war in Syria, Russia allied with the Assad regime, Iran and Hezbollah against the Syrian opposition that was backed by the Arab Sunni countries. Russia transitioned from leading and coordinating the Iranian, Hezbollah, Assad forces and its own forces in the war, to diplomatic move to stabilize the situation and to restore Assad's status in the Arab world.

The Russian interest in bringing Syria back to the Arab League is based on the desire to achieve legitimacy first Arab, later international for Assad 's regime and recognition of Russia as a dominant military and political regional and global power.

Russia's long term strategic interest is to extend its influence over the whole region and the re-integration of Syria into the Arab fold will serve its goals.

Russia is also interested in reduction of the Iranian and Turkish influence and involvement in post war Syria and Syrian shift towards the Arab fold will meet this interest.

The alliance of Syria – Iran –Hezbollah predates the civil war and Assad considers Iran and Hezbollah as reliable allies. Therefore it is unlikely that re-integration of Syria into the Arab fold will impact the Syrian relations with Iran and Hezbollah in the short time.

The US - has changed its stance on the Syrian regime and US Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey said that Washington is not looking for a “regime change” in Syria, but rather a “different” government, contradicting previous statements that had called for the removal of President Al-Assad.²²

Israel has a strategic interest to contain the influence of Iran in Syria and Lebanon and the re-integration of Syria into the Arab fold will support the Israeli interest. The Syrian improved relations with the Arab world will not change the Israeli "Red Lines" policy in Syria.

Notes

¹ UAE to reopen Damascus embassy after seven years, Al Jazeera, December 27, 2018.

² 'The blackest stain on the revolution': Arab regimes bring Syria's Assad back into the fold, The New Arab, December 27, 2018.

³ Sudan’s Bashir lands in Syria in first visit by Arab leader, MEMO, December 17, 2018.

⁴ Tunisia resumes direct flights with Syria as UAE reopens Damascus embassy, MEMO ,December 27, 2018.

⁵ UAE reopens Syrian embassy in Damascus, Arab News, December 27, 2018.

⁶ UAE Foreign Minister: We seek the containment of the Syrian crisis, Al Arabiya, March 6, 2019.

⁷ UAE Foreign Minister: We seek the containment of the Syrian crisis, Al Arabiya, March 6, 2019.

⁸ Tunisia resumes direct flights with Syria as UAE reopens Damascus embassy, MEMO ,December 27, 2018.

⁹ Zvi Bar'el , Under Russia's Auspices, Syria Looks for Legitimacy in Arab World, Haaretz, December 27, 2018.

¹⁰ Zvi Bar'el , Under Russia's Auspices, Syria Looks for Legitimacy in Arab World, Haaretz, December 27, 2018.

¹¹ Tunisia resumes direct flights with Syria as UAE reopens Damascus embassy, MEMO ,December 27, 2018.

¹² Sudan's Bashir lands in Syria in first visit by Arab leader, MEMO, December 17, 2018.

¹³ Sudan's Bashir lands in Syria in first visit by Arab leader, MEMO, December 17, 2018.

¹⁴ Syria takes part in first Arab meeting since 2011, Al Arabiya, March 3, 2019.

¹⁵ Tunisia resumes direct flights with Syria as UAE reopens Damascus embassy, MEMO ,December 27, 2018.

¹⁶ Russia calls for Syria's membership in Arab League to be restored, MEMO, December 11, 2018.

¹⁷ Russia calls for Syria's membership in Arab League to be restored, MEMO, December 11, 2018.

¹⁸ Al-Jubeir: It is premature to determine the return of Syria to the Arab League, Al Arabiya, March 4, 2019.

¹⁹ <https://complyadvantage.com/knowledgebase/sanctions/sanctioned-countries/syria/>

²⁰ Seven Syrian ministers added to EU sanctions list, Arab News, March 5, 2019.

²¹ Seven Syrian ministers added to EU sanctions list, Arab News, March 5, 2019.

²² Tunisia resumes direct flights with Syria as UAE reopens Damascus embassy, MEMO, December 27, 2018.