

Syria: Normalizing Bashar al-Assad's Regime

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Syria, the Arab League, and the counter-revolutionary process

After enforcing the suspension and isolation of Bashar al-Assad's dictatorship for the last twelve years, the Arab League voted to [welcome it back](#) to membership on May 7, 2023. Then, on May 19, Assad was included in the League's summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, hosted by Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS).

MBS declared that he was "happy to welcome President Bashar al-Assad," hoping that "Syria's return to the Arab League would lead to an end to the Syrian crisis" and turn the page on "painful years of struggle." During his speech at the summit, Assad called for "joint Arab action for solidarity, peace in the region, development and prosperity instead of war and destruction," before meeting with MBS.

Earlier that same day, he shook hands with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, met with his Tunisian counterpart Kais Saïed, as well as with the Emirati Vice President, Sheikh Mansour ben Zayed. While the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has championed the normalization of Damascus since 2018 and reportedly invited Bashar al-Assad to COP28, Saudi Arabia has played the key role in opening the door for [Syria's return to the League](#). Saudi Arabia accelerated the process after the earthquake by opening talks with Iran, which culminated in the official [restoration of diplomatic ties](#) brokered by China between Tehran and Riyadh.

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NO CONCESSIONS FROM DAMASCUS

Damascus had granted no real concessions in exchange for its return to the Arab League. League members expected but did not require Assad to allow the return of Syrian refugees without retributions, create a credible political process that will lead to elections, and enact measures to stop the smuggling of narcotics from Syria into neighboring countries.

We should be skeptical about these expectations, as they are largely for show. Assad's regime has no intentions on delivering on any of them. Just recently, the [Access Center for Human Rights](#) documented that his regime paid human smugglers between \$150 and \$3000 per person to take Syrian refugees deported by Beirut back to Lebanon.

The other Arab states will certainly not put any pressure on Damascus to meet any expectation of democratization, as they are not themselves "beacons of democracy," to say the least. They are little interested in the wellbeing of the popular classes in their own countries, let alone in Syria. These expectations are mainly for the US and European states' consumption.

The US has officially denounced the normalization of Assad, but has been unable to stop the region's states from rekindling ties with Damascus. However, a new bill introduced in May 2023 called the

[“Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act of 2023”](#) seeks to expand the list of targets for its Caesar sanctions to include all members of the Syrian parliament, senior members of the ruling Baath Party, and those responsible for diverting international humanitarian aid.

The bill also takes aim at a US-backed effort to send Jordanian electricity and Egyptian gas to Lebanon via a transnational pipeline that runs through Syria. The Syrian government would receive in-kind compensation in the form of gas supplies, rather than cash, for its participation in the stalled four-country energy project. The bill would amend the Caesar Act to make such in-kind transactions with Damascus sanctionable.

In the EU, there are also signs of opposition by some European states that oppose normalization, the lifting of sanctions, and any disbursement of funds for reconstruction before a political transition. On the other hand, several other countries, including Italy, Greece, Romania, Cyprus and Austria, are in favor of normalization with Damascus in hopes of sending refugees back to Syria.

Cracking Down on Drug Smugglers

In contrast to the regime’s intransigence on refugees and democratization, it has shown some flexibility on cracking down on the smuggling of the drug captagon, an addictive stimulant. But even on this it will face some resistance from within the regime.

Much of the captagon production and distribution is controlled by the Syrian Army’s [Fourth Division and its affiliated Syrian businessmen](#). Over the last decade, its captagon operation, especially smuggling of the drug abroad, has exploded, turning it into a lucrative part of Syria’s war economy—estimated to be worth billions of dollars a year.

The Saudis, however, are intent on cracking down on all this. Between 2016 and 2022, they foiled attempts to smuggle more than 600 million amphetamine pills from Lebanon. And Assad has signaled willingness to cooperate. Thus, at a meeting hosted by Jordan in May 2023 with Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Egypt, Damascus [agreed to](#) “take the necessary steps to stop smuggling across the borders with Jordan and Iraq” and to work to identify producers and transporters of narcotics.

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In May, two airstrikes, most likely ordered by Jordan, targeted drug trafficking operations in Syria, one of them assassinating the notorious Syrian drug lord Merhi al-Ramthan and his family. In addition, Damascus has carried out a spate of arrests targeting drug traders [in southern Syria](#). Moreover, Saudi Arabia has promised financial aid of [up to \\$4 billion according to some sources](#) to Syria in exchange for reducing and controlling captagon production and smuggling.

SAUDI ARABIA’S SHIFTING FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY

The rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Syria has been developing for several years. [In May 2021](#), Syria’s Minister of Tourism, Rami Martini, took the regime’s first official visit to the Saudi kingdom since the uprising over ten years ago. Saudi Arabia’s reasons for rehabilitating Damascus are connected to its national interests and [regional dynamics](#).

The [normalization process](#) is a product of Saudi Arabia’s evolving political strategy in the region. MBS’s confrontational foreign policy, exemplified by the kingdom’s deadly war in Yemen and its policy of maximum pressure against Iran and its regional allies, has been a failure.

This policy became a political obstacle to Riyadh's plans to reform the economy, attract foreign investors, and open the country to tourists. It has sought, therefore, to establish more cordial relations with its neighbors. It began to shift in this direction, ending its confrontation with Qatar and currying favor with Turkey's Erdogan. In March of 2023, it deposited \$5 billion in Turkey's central bank to boost the country's economy. Saudi Arabia's strategic reorientation culminated this April in it [establishing diplomatic relations with Iran](#) through China's mediation.

Since then, both states have affirmed their willingness to work together for "[security, stability and prosperity](#)" in the Middle East. This pact is particularly important for Saudi Arabia to stabilize Yemen and prevent security threats at its southern border. The rapprochement will allow the two countries to reopen their embassies and to implement economic and security cooperation agreements signed more than 20 years ago.

ECONOMIC REFORM AS THE UNDERLYING OBJECTIVE

These foreign policy shifts are driven by the Kingdom's need to focus on economic reforms and objectives laid out in its [Vision 2030](#), which sets as a goal ending dependence on fossil fuels and securing \$100 billion in annual FDI by the end of the decade.

Saudi Arabia had faced real challenges before its recent foreign policy shift. FDI flows had dropped from a 200 percent increase between 2018 and 2019 to a 20 percent increase between 2019 and 2020. The ruling regime hopes to reverse this decline by luring more investors based on normalizing its relations with the region and stabilizing its crises.

Its key aim in economic diversification is the development of its tourism sector. Riyadh intends to reach [100 million visitors per year in 2030](#) and open 315,000 new hotel rooms to accommodate them. In March 2023, it launched a new airline, Riyadh Air, which aims to serve 100 international destinations.

The kingdom hopes to direct investment into mega-cities such as NEOM, the Red Sea Project, and Qiddiya, which is projected to be an international entertainment hub, including a Six Flags theme park. The Saudi monarchy promises to plow a staggering \$1 trillion into the tourism sector over the next decade.

It has already poured money into the archaeological site of al-Ula, which had been abandoned for decades, to attract visitors. It is creating other tourist destinations from scratch, such as the luxurious Red Sea Project, which covers 17,400 miles along the west coast, and the Trojena ski resort in the heart of the futuristic metropolis NEOM, which will host the 2029 Asian Winter Games.

By developing its economy in this fashion, the monarchy hopes to compete with other Gulf countries, which are also building enormous tourist industries. Qatar hosted the 2022 World Cup for the first time in the Arab world, while Expo 2020 was held in Dubai, which received more than 12 million international tourists last year.

Riyadh is carrying out all of this development in classic neoliberal fashion. It has announced Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) for many government services, including more traditionally state-run sectors such as education, housing, and health. The *Financial Times* described the plans as "[Saudi Thatcherism](#)."

[In April 2023](#), MBS launched four new "special economic zones" (SEZs) in order to establish non-traditional industries, particularly related to tourism, IT, renewable energy, and logistics, while offering competitive tax rates for businesses, as well as exemption from customs duties on imports, production equipment, and raw materials. The new economic strategy places private capital at the

center of the future Saudi economy.

MULTIPOLARITY AND REGIONAL AUTHORITARIAN STABILITY

Saudi Arabia's final reason for its shift toward normalization of relationships is the perception that Washington can no longer be trusted to provide regional security. The kingdom does not view the US as a reliable hegemon after its defeat in Iraq, failure to protect its allies against popular uprisings, and its increasingly critical posture toward Riyadh.

Despite their persistent rivalries, the states want to lessen their open conflicts, improve their economies, and thereby bolster their rule all to avoid a repeat of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

With the relative decline of US power in the region, other imperialist forces such as China and Russia have asserted their own interests. Regional powers like [Iran](#), Turkey, Qatar, as well as Saudi Arabia have done the same, pursuing their aims, balancing between the rival imperialist powers, and sometimes openly defying the US. The Saudi leadership's decision to cut oil production and maintain high oil prices even at the cost of triggering inflation encapsulates its new independence from Washington.

In this new scenario, the regional powers are all determined to consolidate a form of [authoritarian stability](#). Despite their persistent rivalries, the states want to lessen their open conflicts, improve their economies, and thereby bolster their rule all to avoid a repeat of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

Thus, Qatar put aside its objections and allowed Damascus to return to the Arab League to avoid angering the leadership in Riyadh and other Arab capitals. Qatar has also been steadily mending ties with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.

SYRIA, TURKEY, AND KURDISH SELF-DETERMINATION

Similarly, Turkey has started a process of normalization with the Syrian regime. Thus, in May, the foreign ministers of Russia, Syria, Turkey, and Iran met in Moscow for high-level talks on rebuilding connections between Ankara and Damascus.

Ankara's shift is motivated by two main objectives. Firstly, Erdogan sought to gain votes ahead of the 2023 Presidential elections by accelerating the forced return of Syrian refugees to Syria. Over the past two years, there has been a rise in racist and xenophobic attacks against Syrians in Turkey, and Erdogan has deported thousands of them.

During the election campaign, the opposition candidate Kilicdaroglu adopted an even more severe stance, promising to expel greater numbers. By contrast, Erdogan and his Foreign Minister Çavusoglu stated that there he had worked out a [roadmap](#) with the Syrian regime for the return of the refugees developed following their meeting in Moscow.

The other motive for Erdogan's rapprochement with Syria is their shared determination to deny Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. In 2022, Erdogan stated that "[it is necessary to finish what has been started](#)" and escalate the deployment of the Turkish army and Syrian proxies against Kurdish forces in Syria.

Already their joint operations in the Afrin region in 2018 led to massive violations of human rights and the forced displacement of approximately 137,000 people, predominantly Kurdish residents. Erdogan successfully used these threats of new military operations against Kurds in Syria to whip up

Turkish nationalism and defeat his opponent in the runoff election.

But it remains unclear whether Syria will deliver for Turkey. For its part, Assad's regime has declared that no progress in the relations between the two countries will occur without the end of the Turkish military presence in Syria.

Turkey remains frustrated with Damascus's inability to meet its demands for the return of Syrian refugees and putting an end to Kurdish rule in northeast Syria, also known as "Rojava." The Syrian regime is politically, economically, and militarily too weak to intervene in the north and it sees the return of millions of refugees as a political and security threat, and an additional economic weight it cannot bear.

NO HOPE FOR SYRIAN RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH NORMALIZATION

Assad's re-integration into the Arab League will not facilitate reconstruction and economic recovery in Syria. While sanctions remain a significant obstacle to attract foreign investments, they are not the only one. There are several others.

First, Syria lacks a secure and stable economic condition, making it far too risky for local and foreign corporations to invest in the country. Second, Damascus has proved itself incapable of preventing the constant depreciation of the Syrian pound, further undermining investors' willingness to set up operations. Third, the country does not have functioning infrastructure and Damascus has not invested funds to rebuild it, instead diverting most of its expenditures to the war effort, public sector wages, and subsidies, but even these are declining.

Fourth, the country simply lacks the funds to invest. Deposits in private banks dropped from \$13.87 billion in 2010 to \$1.9 billion in 2022. Finally, the country suffers from a shortage of skilled labor, which is exacerbated by high rates of emigration by young graduates.

In this situation, Damascus will try to use the normalization process to secure aid and investment. But any reconstruction under Assad's regime will not serve the country's popular classes.

Its policies are not designed to remedy the country's economic problems and social inequalities. Instead, it prioritizes consolidating its own despotic power, ensuring its security, and using disbursed funds to curry favor with its clientelist supporters.

[Inequality and injustice](#) are at the heart of the Syrian regime's policies, and no amount of funds it secures will make this leopard change its spots. It will merely use them to bolster its manipulation of state assets, carry out crony privatization, and complete the neoliberal deregulation of the economy.

All of this will be done to the detriment of the country's popular classes. Seeing a country where 90 percent of the population live below the poverty line, few refugees and IDPs will return willingly to the country, and those who are forced to do so will find themselves in desperate conditions and abject destitution.

The normalization of Syria thus serves the interests of Bashar al-Assad and his despotic regime rather than the country's people. It also serves the interests of authoritarian leaders throughout the region who are determined to secure their power and crush the last remnants of the waves of struggle for social transformation from below that began in 2011.

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