

# What Drove Syria Back into the Arab Fold?

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## Abstract

After more than a decade of brutal civil war, which is still not resolved and has left Syria divided in thirds, regional states welcomed President Bashar al-Assad back into the fold in May 2023. The Arab League's decision to reinstate Damascus's membership was the culmination of a slow and fitful process that accelerated when Saudi Arabia took the lead. Still, it is too soon to know whether and how Syrian normalization will evolve beyond its Arab core, especially due to the West's continued sanctions regime. This article analyzes how the evolution of the Syrian crisis, the changing calculus of Arab powers, and American inaction have contributed to Assad's rehabilitation. In conclusion, we consider four areas that will determine the next phase of the normalization process.

The wave of regional normalizations has finally embraced Syria, accelerated by the post-earthquake disaster diplomacy earlier this year. Despite more than a decade of oppression and violence perpetrated by the Assad regime, the agenda for political transition sought by the West and its local allies has failed. In its place, a sanctions regime driven by humanitarianism has been substituted for the policy that was needed to transform the military realities on the ground and end the stalemate in line with the Geneva framework for a new constitution. The bare reality regional actors had to recognize was that President Bashar al-Assad had survived an uprising and prolonged civil war, owing to Russian and Iranian backing, the inability of opposition groups to present a unified front, and the ambivalence of Western and regional actors supporting the opposition. As regional geopolitics has recently transformed, local actors have started to explore ways to resume some level of engagement with the regime to safeguard their interests. Among the many questions raised by the normalization initiatives at the beginning of 2023, the most pertinent was

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whether this momentum would bring the Assad regime back into the mainstream of regional politics, ending more than a decade of international punishment and isolation.

As with other de-escalation processes, the pace and trajectory of normalization with the Syrian regime has not been uniform. While individual countries were driven by different motivations, Saudi Arabia's sudden decision to take the lead created a bandwagon effect, which culminated in Assad's participation in the Arab League summit in Jeddah on May 19, 2023. Meanwhile, with the exception of Qatar, Arab countries resumed some level of bilateral diplomacy. It remains an open question how Syrian normalization will evolve beyond its Arab core, considering the objections from the West and lingering issues about the commitment of the many players. This article examines the trajectory of this process. After reviewing the evolution of the Syrian crisis, we analyze how the new regional politics has changed the calculus of the Gulf actors and forced them to rethink both the Western agenda and their relationships with the regime.

## EVOLUTION OF THE CRISIS AND THE NORMALIZATION AGENDA

As the Syrian conflict has passed year 12, revisiting its different phases and the Arab countries' evolving positions helps explain how normalization has come to dominate the agenda.<sup>1</sup> The first phase was "the peaceful protest movement" of 2011. After the failure of the first and second Arab initiatives to yield a peaceful resolution, this evolved in 2012 into an "armed conflict," a second phase that lasted until the chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta in August 2013.<sup>2</sup> International actors increasingly dominated the crisis, with Western countries seeking to topple Assad and initiate a political transition through Geneva conferences overseen by the United Nations. During this period, Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) adopted more or less consistent policies based on removing the regime. However, instead of supporting the protest movement or seeking to establish democracy in Syria, their unifying desire was to check Iran's influence. When US President Barack Obama ignored the red line he had drawn against Assad's use of chemical weapons, Arab states realized the American ambivalence toward removing the regime. In addition, and perhaps more important, the changing course of the Arab Spring triggered fault lines among the regional countries, which wore away Arab unity over Syria.

In the third phase, from 2013 to 2015, Arab countries—mainly Saudi Arabia and Qatar—continued to coordinate with Turkey to bring down Assad, while the UAE started to chart a different course. In addition to the resilient support of Iran, the Russian military intervention in September 2015 laid bare the obstacles to removing the regime.<sup>3</sup> For its part, Turkey, having realized Assad's durability, started to change its focus from regime change to its security needs, especially by confronting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a group that included Kurds. By contrast, the United States supported the SDF as part of its Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. This significantly altered the military dynamics on the ground.<sup>4</sup> While fighting ISIS and facing other challenges created by the conflict, such as the refugee exodus and the spillover of terrorism, drove

<sup>1</sup> The classification is borrowed from Marwan Kabalan.

<sup>2</sup> Marwan Kabalan, "The Syrian Armed Opposition: Clear Goal, Lack of Vision," *Siyasat Arabiya*, no. 2 (2013): 1–19.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Marwan Kabalan, "Rise of the 'Islamic State' and Shifts in the Levant's Regional System," *Siyasat Arabiya*, no. 12 (2014): 1–15.

Western interests, the Geneva framework for a Syrian political transition continued to be treated as the ultimate solution. This was reaffirmed through UN Security Council Resolution 2254. However, Western powers were not willing to use the coercive instruments necessary to realize that objective. Prioritizing counterterrorism effectively put regime change on the back burner.

The fourth phase ran from 2015 to 2020, with major military action abated and the current lines of control established. International actors and non-Arab regional countries exercised more influence, as Saudi Arabia and the UAE were bogged down in the Yemen conflict. The fight against ISIS ended, while the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party—managed to gain a foothold in the northeastern part of the country. Although initially accepting deconfliction arrangements allowing rebel-controlled territories in four parts of Syria, the regime eventually managed to consolidate and secure itself by crushing the opposition's military and political control. While the regime was intent on eliminating the last remaining anti-Assad stronghold in the northwestern city of Idlib, Turkey prevented this by supporting the rebel governance in the province and entering into a new deal with Russia and Iran, known as the Astana framework. Starting in 2016, Turkey undertook a series of military interventions in northern Syria against ISIS and the US-backed YPG. It fought to halt the Syrian regime's advance on Idlib in February 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Parallel to the military developments on the ground, there were various attempts to salvage the political process. At times, regional countries such as Saudi Arabia or Jordan took the lead, but the Western powers and Russia usually played larger roles. By 2018, negotiations stalled over Assad's position in the political transition, while talks on writing a new constitution bore no fruit. As the political process was delegated to the overwhelmed United Nations, and the opposition lost ground internally and support internationally, the Syrian crisis came to be framed more in terms of its humanitarian dimension. Consequently, coupled with the US aversion to using force in support of regime change, Western governments imposed sanctions on Damascus. A deadlock emerged—matching the military stalemate—with reconstruction assistance, refugee returns, the removal of sanctions, and normalization of the regime all conditioned on each other.

To move beyond this impasse, many Arab countries, mainly the UAE and to some extent Jordan and Iraq, started to look for alternatives. An early mover, the UAE opened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018.<sup>6</sup> It also worked to prepare the ground for Syria's return to the Arab League, where the regime had some sympathizers, such as Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Oman. Several of these countries declined to sever their diplomatic relations with Damascus when the league decided to suspend Syria in 2011. During the Covid pandemic, the Emiratis spearheaded efforts to return the regime to the fold, capitalizing on the emergency response. It was not completely successful in convincing other countries to accept Assad's return. In particular, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt maintained their objections. The UAE's eagerness to promote Syria's reintegration is closely related to its proactive regional policies.<sup>7</sup> In line with its opposition to the reformist spirit of the Arab Spring, the UAE was keen to restore Assad's legitimacy, which would have dealt a symbolic blow to the rival bloc, mainly Qatar and Turkey. The Emiratis also realized

<sup>5</sup> Saban Kardas, "Turkey and the Idlib Crisis: Lingering Dilemmas and Future Prospects," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (2020): 111–119.

<sup>6</sup> Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies: Political Studies Unit, "Emirati Normalization with the Syrian Regime: Motives and Implications," November 16, 2021, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/UAE-Normalisation-with-the-Assad-Regime-in-Syria.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Daher, "The UAE and Damascus: The Normalisation of the Syrian Regime," EUI MEDirections Blog, November 15, 2021, <https://blogs.eui.eu/medirections/the-uae-and-damascus-the-normalisation-of-the-syrian-regime>.

that the restoration of diplomacy would be necessary to rebuild Syria and limit the encroachment of Turkey and Iran into Arab affairs.

## The New Phase of the Conflict in the Age of Regional Normalization

During its fifth phase, the Syrian crisis came to be shaped by the regional quest for de-escalation. As countries sought a way out of the mutually destructive stalemate created by the securitized response to the Arab Spring and the intra-Gulf crisis of 2017, overlapping waves of normalization took place.<sup>8</sup> Following the Al-Ula summit, which set in motion a roadmap for repairing the rift between Qatar and the Quartet countries—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt—the Emiratis led a second pathway toward diplomacy through the Abraham Accords between Israel and a few Arab countries. In a third wave, the UAE and Saudi Arabia initiated a reconciliation process with the major non-Arab actors—Turkey and Iran—that aimed to cool other hotspots in the broader neighborhood like Libya and Yemen. Turkey also prioritized normalization in its overall foreign policy, reaching out not only to rival Arab actors but also to Israel and Greece. Eventually, the March 10, 2023 deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore diplomatic relations, brokered by China, had a watershed effect.<sup>9</sup>

The drive to bring Syria back into the mainstream is in many ways a culmination of these regional normalization drives. In 2021, Jordan explored the possibility of bringing Assad in from the cold. While Amman initially aligned with the GCC countries to oppose the regime, by 2018 it had changed its position. King Abdullah II has been one of the strongest advocates for acknowledging that the regime will endure and that regional countries must adjust. In 2018, Jordan experimented with Russian-brokered bilateral cooperation to stabilize border areas.<sup>10</sup> Abdullah also sought the Biden administration's help in exempting the kingdom from sanctions as it initiated economic and cultural exchange with Damascus. In parallel, the UAE increased its efforts, and Assad visited the country in March 2022. Despite support from some countries, the Emiratis failed to arrange Syria's readmission to the Arab League during that year's summit in Algeria.<sup>11</sup>

## The Pathway to Arab League Readmission

Momentum to break the stalemate accelerated in early 2023, culminating in Assad's attendance at the Arab League summit in Jeddah on May 19. At the beginning of the year, a series of Arab, regional, and international initiatives were under way.<sup>12</sup> The visit of UAE Foreign Minister Abdul-

<sup>8</sup> Saban Kardas and Bulent Aras, *Geopolitics of the New Middle East: Perspectives from Inside and Outside* (New York: Routledge, 2023); Mahjoob Zweiri, Md Mizanur Rahman, and Arwa Kamal, *The 2017 Gulf Crisis: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Baker, "Chinese-Brokered Deal Opens Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S.," *The New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Armenak Tokmajyan, "Thwarting Jordan's Bahhara Trade with Syria Risks Social Unrest in Ramtha," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 19, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Emile Hokayem, "Assad Comes in from the Cold," *Foreign Affairs*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/syria/bashar-al-assad-arab-league>.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Mason, "From the 'Grey Zone' to the End Zone: GCC State Influence and Prospects for Syria's Reintegration into the Arab World," Gulf Research Centre, April 13, 2023.

lah bin Zayed Al Nahyan to Damascus was followed by an unexpected move by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to finally approve concrete steps toward normalization. In addition to lower-level contacts between the intelligence and security agencies, a trilateral meeting in late December 2022 that brought together Russian, Turkish, and Syrian defense ministers in Moscow heightened expectations for further steps forward.<sup>13</sup> Progress on the Turkish-Syrian dimension underscored the major role played by Russia, which had been seeking to break the regime's regional and international isolation.

Meanwhile, the February 6 earthquakes gave further impetus for some Arab countries to press ahead with normalization initiatives. Similar to the mobilization of humanitarian assistance during the pandemic, this disaster relief opened a window of opportunity within which diplomatic exchange became possible.<sup>14</sup> For the first time, for instance, the foreign minister of Jordan visited Damascus. Some Arab leaders, such as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, talked on the phone with Assad, and the Syrian leader visited Oman.

There emerged three Arab positions on Assad's restoration. The first was shared by those countries already advocating normalization, such as the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Jordan. Since Oman, despite the Arab League decision in 2011, had never cut ties, in 2020 it became the first Arab Gulf country to reinstate its ambassador.<sup>15</sup> But Arab states differed in their levels of engagement.<sup>16</sup> While the UAE explored unconditional normalization, Jordan's main motivation was to induce behavioral change. Nonetheless, it became obvious that normalization required a critical mass through other countries' coming on board. The second position among Arab states was categorical opposition to Assad's restoration. The most notable country in this group is Qatar, which has remained fully aligned with the United States and Turkey throughout the conflict's many phases. On several occasions, Doha asserted that it would normalize relations with the regime only after a just political solution to the crisis within the framework of Resolution 2254. This would include mechanisms to ensure accountability for the humanitarian tragedy of the Syrian people. Qatar added an additional layer, conditioning normalization on Arab consensus.<sup>17</sup>

A third set of countries adopted a wait-and-see approach focused on conditionality. While Saudi Arabia had by 2023 given up its staunch opposition to normalization, Riyadh has increasingly focused on what it can extract from the regime. The Saudis were driven mostly by a concern with pushing Iran out of Syria as part of their containment policy. While Saudi Arabia reiterated its commitment to Assad's ouster, analysts believed Riyadh would allow him to remain in power if Tehran pulled back.<sup>18</sup> Still, at the beginning of 2023, the Saudis appeared to be in no hurry to

<sup>13</sup> Ragip Soylu and Levant Kemal, "No Deals Made at the First Top Turkey-Syria Meeting in 11 Years," *Middle East Eye*, January 2, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-syria-meeting-no-deals-made-first-high-level-talks>.

<sup>14</sup> Saban Kardas, Bulent Aras, Farah Al-Qawasmi, Hicret Battaloglu, and Sinem Cengiz, *GCC's 'Disaster Diplomacy' toward Türkiye and Syria*, Gulf Studies Center, no. 10 (2023), [https://qu.edu.qa/static\\_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/documents/Policy%20Brief%2010%20Updated.pdf](https://qu.edu.qa/static_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/documents/Policy%20Brief%2010%20Updated.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Al Jazeera, "Oman Becomes First Gulf State to Reinstate Ambassador in Syria," October 5, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/5/oman-becomes-first-gulf-state-to-reinstate-ambassador-in-syria>.

<sup>16</sup> Hokayem, "Assad Comes in from the Cold."

<sup>17</sup> Reuters, "Reasons for Syria's Arab League Suspension Still Stand, Says Qatar," April 13, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/reasons-syrias-arab-league-suspension-still-stand-says-qatar-2023-04-13>.

<sup>18</sup> The White House, "Joint Statement on the Meeting between President Barack Obama and King Salman Bin Abd Al Aziz al Saud," September 4, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/04/joint-statement-meeting-between-president-barack-obama-and-king-salman>.

move for a rapid normalization similar to that advocated by the UAE or Bahrain. As their foreign minister put it, “Syria could return to Arab League, but not yet.”<sup>19</sup>

But Saudi Arabia swiftly changed its policy, creating a bandwagon effect. While other advocates of normalization were searching for a gradual and conditional pathway for Syria’s return, Riyadh essentially opened the way for a “rush reintegration.”<sup>20</sup> Intense diplomatic traffic ensued between Damascus and other regional capitals.<sup>21</sup> As Saudi Arabia and Syria quickly moved from announcing bilateral deals on consular missions to opening the embassy in Damascus, countries like Jordan and Egypt raised concerns about the lack of concessions, as well as the negative reactions from Western countries.<sup>22</sup> The illegal trafficking of the drug captagon, which originated from Syria, had become a major concern, and there were regional and international expectations of extracting commitments from Damascus. Jordan, in particular, was keen to force Syria to accept a roadmap for refugee resettlement and counternarcotics collaboration.<sup>23</sup> However, capitalizing on its dominant position and the domestic challenges of states like Egypt, Riyadh easily managed to rally others behind its proposals. Following meetings in Jeddah and Amman, foreign ministers of the Arab League countries agreed in May 2023 to “launch a leading Arab role in efforts to resolve” the crisis.<sup>24</sup> Having agreed to resume Syria’s participation in the league’s meetings, this preparatory work resulted in Assad’s address to the Jeddah summit later that month.

These developments made Qatar’s position all the more crucial, as its categorical opposition remained a major roadblock. Doha voiced its objections to normalization, calling it “a betrayal” of the victims. Qatar’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Majed Al Ansari, declared that the government’s position was “not affected by the interactions taking place, unless there is a development internally in Syria.”<sup>25</sup> While Al Ansari argued that “there is no Arab consensus on normalization with the regime at the present time,” the rapid pace of events through April and May forced a subtle policy adjustment. Defying expectations for a showdown, Doha acted within the spirit of the regional de-escalation and allowed Riyadh to take the lead. Qatar eventually refrained from objecting to Syria’s readmission to the Arab League, with the minister of state at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh Al Khulaifi, asserting: “Qatar always seeks to support what achieves the Arab consensus and will not be an obstacle to that, and this consensus today is mainly related to the regime’s return to the Arab League.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, in line with its quest for autonomy over foreign policy, Doha fell short of bandwagoning with the regional hegemon.

<sup>19</sup> Reuters, “Saudi Foreign Minister: Syria Could Return to Arab League, but Not Yet,” March 7, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Hokayem, “Assad Comes in from the Cold.”

<sup>21</sup> Kali Robinson, “Syria Is Normalizing Relations with Arab Countries. Who Will Benefit?” Council on Foreign Relations, May 11, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/syria-normalizing-relations-arab-countries-who-will-benefit>.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel R. DePetris, “The West and Its Arab Partners Are Heading for a Collision on Syria Policy,” RUSI, May 19, 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/west-and-its-arab-partners-are-heading-collision-syria-policy>.

<sup>23</sup> Mohammed Ersan, “Jordan’s Plan for Syria Normalisation: Refugees, Drugs and Militias,” Middle East Eye, April 4, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-syria-plan-normalisation-refugees-drugs-militias>.

<sup>24</sup> Ahram Online, “Arab League Readmits Syrian Govt after 12-Year Absence,” May 7, 2023, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/500267.aspx>.

<sup>25</sup> Asmahan Qarjoui, “Qatar Will Not ‘Betray’ Victims of Syrian Crisis by Normalising with Regime: Official,” *Doha News*, March 29, 2023, <https://dohanews.co/qatar-will-not-betray-victims-of-syrian-crisis-by-normalising-with-regime-official>.

<sup>26</sup> MOFA—Media & Communication Department, “Qatar Participates in Meeting of Arab League Council on Syria, Sudan,” May 7, 2023, <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/1444/10/17/qatar-participates-in-meeting-of-arab-league-council-on-syria-sudan>.

Qatar's constructive abstention, symbolized by the emir's early departure from the Jeddah summit to avoid meeting Assad, affirmed that both the bilateral and the regional normalization would proceed at least partially.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, this was how the secretary general of the Arab League, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, described the rationale behind the gradual approach to managing this thorny issue without undermining Arab unity.<sup>28</sup>

## DRIVERS OF THE ARAB GULF'S NORMALIZATION WITH SYRIA

Different actors have their unique motivations for ending the isolation of the regime, whose strategic calculations will shape the evolution of this process. The major drivers are the changing regional reality, which has altered the policies of local actors, as well as the role of the United States. While most countries initially sought to topple Assad for a mixture of moral and strategic reasons, their policies diverged over time. Due to the stalemate on the ground, the moment for revolution came to a quick end. Even supporters of the Syrian opposition had to adjust their policies as early as 2015, if not before.

Despite pockets of opposition control in Syria, the lack of a coherent US policy backed by force doomed the framework for political transition. Today, Assad continues to exercise control over major parts of Syria and enjoys the backing of its foreign patrons, Russia and Iran. The sanctions regime, epitomized by the US Caesar Act of 2019, hindered earlier normalization efforts, such as when Assad's supporters sought diplomatic engagement and reconstruction aid in exchange for the return of refugees. But economic tools could neither compel the regime to adopt a more compromising stance nor improve the conditions of the millions of displaced civilians.<sup>29</sup>

Arab countries' drive to re-regionalize the Syrian crisis stems from a realistic reading of the international community's conflict-resolution mechanisms and the limits of Western commitment. As aptly put by Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan, the growing consensus within the Arab world saw the status quo as unworkable, and engagement was needed to address humanitarian and other concerns.<sup>30</sup> The deeply entrenched stalemate has created high costs for all stakeholders, starting with the countries bordering Syria. They have borne the brunt of Western military disengagement, from refugee flows to instability in border areas to smuggling and organized crime. As outside attention is now drawn to Ukraine and Taiwan, there remains little interest in the West to move the Syrian political process beyond stalemate. Despite the US stand against normalization, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have taken bolder de-escalatory steps to seek a new regional order.<sup>31</sup> The devastating February 2023 earthquake also accelerated the process, as it threw into question the morality of freezing in place the stalemate. Many countries dispatched

<sup>27</sup> Adam Lucente, "Qatar Emir Skips Assad's Arab League Speech in Saudi Arabia," *Al-Monitor*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/qatar-emir-skips-assads-arab-league-speech-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>28</sup> *Arab News*, "Arab League Re-Admits Syria after 11-Year Absence," May 7, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2299161/middle-east>.

<sup>29</sup> DePetris, "The West and Its Arab Partners."

<sup>30</sup> Reuters, "Arab States Need New Syria Approach, Saudi Minister Says," February 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/arab-states-need-new-approach-towards-syria-says-saudi-foreign-minister-2023-02-19/>; *The National*, "Saudi Foreign Minister says Syria dialogue could pave way for Arab League return," March 8, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/saudi-arabia/2023/03/08/saudi-foreign-minister-says-syria-dialogue-could-pave-way-for-arab-league-return>.

<sup>31</sup> Giorgio Cafiero and Emily Milliken, "Analysis: How important is Syria's return to the Arab League?" *Al Jazeera*, May 19, 2023.

emergency aid to regime-controlled areas, highlighting the dilemmas raised by the sanctions and underscoring the need to move forward.

For its part, the Syrian regime has sought normalization on three interrelated levels: bilaterally, with the Arab League, and internationally. While Assad previously capitalized on the cracks in the Arab bloc to ensure his survival, this time he has navigated the same divisions to make his way back into the fold. By maintaining power and making himself indispensable to solving the very problems he created, Assad has effectively expanded the base of countries seeking to rehabilitate him. He has also used prospective concessions on the narcotics trade as another incentive.<sup>32</sup>

Now that he has returned to the Arab fold, Assad will try to turn political normalization into economic normalization, as he is in dire need of financial assistance to consolidate his domestic position.<sup>33</sup> He is likely to seek broader international recognition to clear the way for greater room to maneuver economically and politically. It is not clear what kinds of conditions Saudi Arabia has placed on continuing relations.<sup>34</sup> Nor is it certain that Assad will receive a quick influx of funds. Nonetheless, he has scored a major achievement by driving a wedge between Arab states and the West, at the very least.

## US POLICY AND THE DILEMMAS OF SANCTIONS

Through its acts of omission and commission, US policy has been the main factor shaping Syrian diplomacy. Although the United States has been opposed to normalization without progress on the political track, in practical terms its Syria policy has prioritized counterterrorism, stability operations on the ground, and human rights. While some European countries have explored avenues for engaging with Damascus, the European Union has mostly followed the US lead. The dynamics of great-power politics have spurred the United States to advise its allies against contacts with the Syrian regime in an effort to stymie Russia. Unsurprisingly, throughout the course of recent Gulf diplomacy, Washington has opposed restoring Assad's legitimacy without clear concessions.<sup>35</sup> However, a US official's remark that Arab states should "make sure to get something for that engagement" with Assad was seen as a tacit caution light and not a prohibition.<sup>36</sup> To some observers, the Americans effectively left the matter to their Arab partners.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See the comments by former US Ambassador Robert Ford in Salim A. Essaid, "Syria's Assad lands in Saudi Arabia seeking financial incentives at Arab summit," *Al-Monitor*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/syrias-assad-lands-saudi-arabia-seeking-financial-incentives-arab-summit>.

<sup>33</sup> CNN, "Assad Banks on New 'Global Order' to Help His Own Rehabilitation," May 22, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/05/22/middleeast/assad-new-global-order-rehabilitation-mime-intl>.

<sup>34</sup> Some Arab commentators see such an implicit conditionality emerging through a tit-for-tat: Taylor Luck, "Arab states see a path process through Syria. It could be bumpy," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2023/0516/Arab-states-see-a-path-to-progress-through-Syria-It-could-be-bumpy>.

<sup>35</sup> Al Jazeera, "US says it will not normalise relations with Syria's Assad," May 5, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/5/us-says-it-will-not-normalise-relations-with-syrias-assad>.

<sup>36</sup> Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Arab Countries Should 'Get Something' from Syria for Normalisation, US Official Says," *The National*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/03/30/arab-countries-should-get-something-from-syria-for-normalisation-us-official-says>.

<sup>37</sup> Bassam Barabandi, "Arabs Normalize with Syria Out of Fear of Iran and Uncertainty About US policy," *Stimson Center*, May 18, 2023, <https://www.stimson.org/2023/arabs-normalize-with-syria-out-of-fear-of-iran-and-uncertainty-about-us-policy>. The Biden administration rejected such criticisms. In late March, for the first time, the administration activated the Caesar Act to blacklist some figures involved in captagon traffic: Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Former US Officials Sound



The West's opposition to reconciliation has been framed in moralistic terms, leading some analysts to argue that its relations with the Gulf are at a crossroads.<sup>38</sup> Critics have argued against the lack of clear conditions, without which Assad will have few incentives to negotiate with the opposition while his crimes will go unpunished. Such a position was advocated by the G7 just after the Arab League meeting, with the leaders reaffirming their commitment to "authentic and enduring progress towards a political solution" and calling for accountability "for those responsible for the use of chemical weapons and violations of international law, including international humanitarian law and international human rights law, as applicable."<sup>39</sup> Critics have also highlighted Assad's track record of renegeing on commitments, such as with Jordan when it sought limited normalization. Therefore, a group of former US officials and Syria experts sent a letter calling on the Biden administration to take more concrete measures to thwart Assad's rehabilitation.<sup>40</sup> Frustrated by the reluctance to act, anti-normalization activists shifted attention to Congress. This resulted in a bipartisan initiative, dubbed the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act. Aimed at preventing US normalization, the legislation would also strengthen the Caesar Act by mandating new sanctions and calling for a formal strategy to counter re-engagement with Damascus.<sup>41</sup> The move appears to be driven by a desire to deter financial flows into government-held parts of the country, which would help to scuttle reconstruction aid, a dividend Assad hopes to reap from his Gulf partners.

While there may be a strong moral case against rapid normalization, the prudence of insisting on perpetuating the West's Syria strategy is highly dubious. The failure of substituting sanctions for policy has long been acknowledged.<sup>42</sup> Yet there have been no signs that the United States has been engaged in a serious revision of policy to address the inconsistencies of demanding a political transition when the regional environment has changed substantially. This has led Gulf states to seek a new approach. Successive US administrations have offered no realistic way out of the stalemate, and there is no guarantee that congressional initiatives during a period of divided government will fundamentally alter the terms of the debate, much less US policy.

## CONCLUSION

The Arab countries' drive to re-regionalize the Syrian crisis represents a realistic reading of the international community's conflict-resolution mechanisms and the limits of Western commitment. They have demonstrated the pragmatism needed to adapt to the new regional reality by compartmentalizing many of the divisive questions, such as the rivalry with Iran. This is also where the roots of the divergence between the United States and regional countries lie. The frus-

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Alarm on Biden's Syria Policy," *Al-Monitor*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/former-us-officials-sound-alarm-bidens-syria-policy>.

<sup>38</sup> DePetris, "The West and Its Arab Partners."

<sup>39</sup> The White House, "G7 Hiroshima Leaders' Communiqué," May 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/05/20/g7-hiroshima-leaders-communicue>.

<sup>40</sup> Hagedorn, "Former US Officials Sound Alarm."

<sup>41</sup> Daphne Psaedakis and Maya Gebeily, "US Lawmakers Introduce Bill to Combat Normalization with Syria's Assad," *Reuters*, May 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-lawmakers-introduce-bill-combat-normalization-with-syrias-assad-2023-05-11>.

<sup>42</sup> See comments by Joshua Landis in Ali Harb, "Conundrum': How the US Is Dealing with Assad Normalisation," *Al Jazeera*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/19/conundrum-how-the-us-is-dealing-with-assad-normalisation>.

tration with US inaction on many vital issues has been behind the Gulf powers' recent quest to regionalize their security management and diversify their foreign relations. The American failure to use coercion to topple Assad has been part of the problem, as Washington insisted on sanctions and the isolation of the regime to force a political transition. Some experts argue that this split with the West may usher in a "historic first for the Arab world: the formation of a locally organized, post-Cold War, post-Pax Americana security framework."<sup>43</sup> While time will tell, we can see that American engagement in the Middle East is no longer business as usual.

The Arab rehabilitation of Assad has been pursued not because of its intrinsic value in the resolution of the Syrian crisis but because of its utility to each actor's priorities. Therefore, the calculations of individual countries will determine the progress of normalization in the coming months. It may be too early to expect the full reintegration of the regime in both economic and political terms, considering the vague mechanics of the process, such as conditionality, as well as substantive questions about the Syrian crisis.

The price paid for diplomatic flexibility and pragmatism has been sidestepping the root causes of the conflict. In the hype surrounding the Arab League's acceptance of the regime, the file has been largely reduced to extracting concessions over the return of refugees or dealing with captagon trafficking, at the expense of shaping the political transition.<sup>44</sup> In its current form, normalization does not guarantee the end of the Syrian conflict; it may instead open a new chapter. Therefore, the evolution of the Syrian crisis will depend on the answers to four questions.

First, the fragmentation of territorial lines of control will continue to haunt Syria. Although the regime has broken its isolation, the northeastern and northwestern parts of the country remain beyond its reach. It is highly unlikely that the normalization process will embolden Damascus to fully recapture areas held by the opposition, the PYD, or Turkey. The risk of a new round of war persists if the regime seeks to regain control.

Second, questions surround the regime's ability or willingness to reciprocate. For example, regional actors expect it to curtail Iran's power. However, during the Gulf's rush to embrace Assad, Riyadh and Tehran forged a parallel reconciliation. As he is emboldened, Assad will likely resist calls to completely sever ties with Iran. On counternarcotics cooperation, which remains the only major potential area of reciprocity, he will be highly unlikely to meet expectations, considering the revenues generated through captagon.

Third, the Arab rehabilitation of Assad does not seem to have a clear roadmap. Regional states need to offer him dividends that outweigh the benefits of continuing business as usual. While there is a substantive reordering of regional alignments, Gulf countries will need to invest enormous diplomatic capital, as well as economic resources for reconstruction. The insistence of the Western powers on sanctions will keep the cost of normalization high. Moreover, as Syria is brought back into the Arab fold, the countries in the region will have to tackle questions about how to limit the influence of not only Iran but also Russia and Turkey, which have managed to coordinate their positions through the Astana process. In the post-normalization phase, they will likely cooperate within the same framework: Moscow remains committed to it in order to main-

<sup>43</sup> Steven Heydemann, "Syria's Normalization Signals a New Middle Eastern Order," Brookings Institution, May 10, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2023/05/10/syrias-normalization-signals-a-new-middle-eastern-order>.

<sup>44</sup> The Biden administration is reportedly planning to submit to Congress an interagency plan to tackle the Syrian regime's multi-billion-dollar drug business. Elizabeth Hagedorn, "US Readies Strategy to Target Syria's Captagon Trade," Al-Monitor, May 28, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/05/us-readies-strategy-target-syrias-captagon-trade>.

tain unity among the three powers, while Ankara and Tehran have their own reasons to sustain that cooperation. The Arab countries will need to reconcile their positions with the interests of those three outside powers.

Fourth, the Arab Gulf countries also face the same dilemma afflicting Western policy makers: how to address the root causes of the Syrian crisis and tackle the political transition. Discussions on normalization have overwhelmingly focused on regional diplomatic affairs. The agency and plight of the ordinary people have been largely overlooked. As millions of Syrians lack access to basic services and infrastructure, it remains to be seen how the “Arab leadership role” will handle the impossible trinity of political transition, reconstruction, and normalization.

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