



Arab States Discuss Ending Syria's Alienation

Delegates from nine Arab nations gathered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Friday to discuss normalizing ties with Syria and its reconciliation with the Arab League.

Ministers and top officials from the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — along with those of Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan, were involved in Friday's meeting at Saudi Arabia's initiative.

The Arab League suspended Syria's membership after President Bashar al-Assad's government staged a harsh clampdown on protests in 2011.



AP Images

Saudi Deputy Foreign Minister Waleed Al-Khuraiji (right) meets with Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad

Since then, many Middle Eastern countries have avoided al-Assad, making him an outcast over the 12-year conflict that has taken the lives of over half a million people and displaced about half of Syria's pre-war population from their homes.

Saudi Arabia, which has long opposed rapprochement with al-Assad, said that after a reconciliation with Iran, Syria's major regional ally, the country had to adopt a new approach toward Damascus.

In a landmark meeting, Riyadh and Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad decided to reopen embassies soon. Mekdad's arrival was ahead of that of the other nine Arab states meeting on Friday.

Besides, Damascus and Riyadh are working toward resuming flights and consular services for the first time since the conflict began.

Western capitals are likely to protest the notion of reinstating Syria in the 22-member Arab League, whose next meeting is poised to be held in Saudi Arabia in May.

Nonetheless, the prime minister of Qatar dismissed talks of Syria's possible reinstatement in the Arab League.

"There is nothing proposed, it is all speculation," Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani said in a television interview.

Saudi foreign policy analyst Abdulaziz Alghashian stated that a "smooth entry for Syria back into the Arab League will be very much wishful thinking."

"There is still a lot of water to go under the bridge. A lot of people haven't forgotten what Assad has done," he said in an interview with *Al Jazeera* from Riyadh.

Nonetheless, Alghashian claimed that many people in the Arab world, particularly the ruling elites, are hoping "to reintegrate Syria into the Arab fold in order for regional projects to continue."

Saudi Arabia's interest in restoring ties can be perceived as part of its efforts to move toward Vision 2030. Vision 2030 refers to Saudi Arabia's future aim to transform the kingdom into the center of the



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Arab and Islamic world, an investment hub, and a powerhouse linking three continents.

The initiative aims to establish an e-government system, diversify and privatize the economy, as well as make it less dependent on oil exports.

“They’re trying to create a more investment-friendly environment for foreign direct investment, and that is really at the core of the Saudi ruling elite’s decision,” said Alghashian.

Despite Assad not yet controlling all of Syria, the Arab acceptance seems to acknowledge his rule over the war-torn country.

“Assad has simply rejected compromise and waited for his enemies to give up, and it worked,” said Aron Lund of the Century International think tank. “One by one they’re coming back to shake his hand and pretend that the past decade never happened.”

Rehabilitation gives “a message to the opposition that Assad will triumph in the end and that their foreign backers will betray them,” Lund posited in an interview with AFP.

“I don’t think there is a political solution on the table in Syria,” Lund opined. “Currently, there is no military solution either.”

Damascus currently oversees most of Syria, after regaining much of the territory it had lost with help from allies Iran and Russia, as well as Iranian-backed Sh’ite Muslim groups such as Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

Arab nations have been cozying up to al-Assad again, beginning with the UAE, which rebooted relations in late 2018 and has spearheaded attempts to reintegrate Damascus.

On his end, al-Assad is hoping rapprochement with wealthy Gulf states could bring economic relief and money for rebuilding Syria, as global funding seems to be out of reach without a definite political solution to the conflict.

Nonetheless, Lund contends that “US sanctions will continue to deter Saudi or Emirati investment in Syrian business or reconstruction projects.”

“Even without those sanctions it would be a gamble to invest any serious money,” he elaborated.

“The economy is broken by war, corrupt to the point of near lawlessness, and controlled by dangerous and violent regime oligarchs.”

Arab countries are also hoping to boost security co-operation with Syria, which has turned into a narco-state with a \$10 billion fenethylline industry, mostly trafficked to the Gulf.

“Normal relations also means more security cooperation, including on drug trafficking,” Syria specialist Sam Heller told AFP.

The recent Arab détente has undermined Syria’s political and armed opposition, which obtained Arab support particularly in the conflict’s early stages.

“Arab normalization with Damascus certainly diminishes the relevance of Syrian-Syrian negotiations,” Heller said.

Several rounds of UN-brokered talks in Geneva between the government and opposition groups, meant to create a new constitution, have failed.

The government has “traditionally refused to recognise Syrian opposition representatives as its real



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counterparts,” Heller said.

“These bilateral engagements with Saudi Arabia and others are exactly what Damascus has been looking for.”

For Mohammad al-Abdallah of the Syria Justice and Accountability Centre, normalization with al-Assad is an effort “to bring the Arab region back to how it was before 2011.”

“But this won’t work,” he said, “because it is based on too much injustice — against the refugees and the displaced, the missing and the detained.”

In February this year, Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister had said at [a Munich security forum](#) that dialogue with Damascus was necessary “at some point” to at least address humanitarian issues, including a return of refugees.

“You will see not just among the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), but in the Arab world, there is a growing consensus that the status quo is not workable,” he said.

The minister added that without a path toward “maximalist goals” for a political solution, another approach was “being formulated” to address the issue of Syrian refugees in neighboring states and the suffering of civilians, particularly after the destructive earthquake that struck Syria and Türkiye.

“So that’s going to have to go through a dialogue with the government in Damascus at some point in a way that achieves at least the most important of the objectives, especially as regards the humanitarian angle, the return of refugees, et cetera,” he said.

Riyadh hitherto deployed aid planes to government-held territory in Syria as part of earthquake relief efforts, after deploying aid only to the country’s opposition-held northwest at first.



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