

## SYRIA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**On 19 May 2023, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad attended the Arab League (AL) Summit, held in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for the first time in over a decade. The return of Syria back into the Arab fold is evidently part of a broader regional normalization process, which witnessed a major breakthrough with Chinese facilitation on 10 March 2023 between Saudi Arabia and Iran.**

It has been more than a decade since Syria was suspended from the Arab League, which was done in the wake of Damascus's crackdown on protests, in the wake of the 'Arab Spring' protests, which swept across several countries in the region in early 2011. The ensuing civil strife has continued till date, with large portions of the population deeply affected. The humanitarian situation in Syria remains dire, with millions of people suffering from the consequences of prolonged conflict and displacement. Millions of Syrians remain internally displaced or have sought refuge in neighboring countries. The lack of secure and stable conditions prevents many from returning to their homes. Multiple international actors, including the United Nations, have continued their efforts to facilitate a political solution to the Syrian conflict. According to the UN, since the conflict erupted in March 2011, Syria has witnessed unprecedented devastation and displacement. More than 6 million Syrians have left the country and 6.7 million are internally displaced. With more than 14 million people continuing to be in need of assistance, the conflict has caused untold suffering for Syrian men, women and children.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> UN News, <https://news.un.org/en/focus/syria>

It is quite evident that the Arab capitals are now increasingly leaning towards the idea of engaging with Damascus, in order to tackle the challenges faced by the country, which makes engagement necessary. The Arab League's decision to embrace President Al-Assad, despite this 12-year-long war, was not unexpected. Syria's return to regional acceptance had been anticipated for several months, with initial normalization efforts led by countries like the UAE, followed by Saudi Arabia, whose Foreign Minister also recently visited Damascus. Due to the limited control of a weakened opposition over a small portion of Syria and a recent shift in the regional dynamics following Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran, Arab capitals have come to recognize that excluding Syria no longer holds any significance.<sup>2</sup> However, Qatar maintained a firm stance against Syria's reentry into the Arab League. The country had opposed the idea of allowing Syria, under the leadership of President Bashar Al-Assad, to regain its membership within the regional organization. Doha had expressed concerns over the ongoing conflict, the attendant human rights violations, and the lack of progress towards a peaceful resolution. It may be noted that Qatar's position on normalizing relations with the Syrian government remains unaffected despite its reinstatement in the Arab League.

Following two devastating earthquakes in early 2023, Syria had embarked on an extensive diplomatic campaign. Alongside frequent visits from the country's Foreign Minister to regional capitals, President Assad himself has made trips to Oman and the UAE. In a positive development, the U.S. had temporarily eased certain sanctions on Syria for a period of 180 days, allowing for transactions related to earthquake relief efforts. Nevertheless, Syria has encountered challenges in securing financial support from its energy-rich neighboring countries and regional investors to initiate the much-needed reconstruction process, estimated by the UN to cost approximately \$250 billion. The President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, has extended a formal invitation to the Syrian President to participate in the upcoming UN Climate Conference (CoP28) scheduled to be held in Dubai.<sup>3</sup>

With the exception of a few in the Arab world like Qatar, the stance of the Arab world towards Syria continues to change. During a visit to Damascus in January 2023, Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed called on President Assad, focusing on enhancing economic relations. The initial visit of the UAE's top diplomat to Syria took place in November 2021, which set the stage for the Syrian President's significant visit to the UAE in March 2022. This visit marked a historic moment as it was President Assad's first visit to an Arab country since the start of the Syrian conflict a decade ago.

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<sup>2</sup> Abubakar Al Shamahi, Middle East round-up: Syria rejoins the Arab League, AL Jazeera, May 11, 2023 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/11/middle-east-round-up-syria-rejoins-the-arab-league>

<sup>3</sup> Cop28: Syria's Assad 'received invitation' from UAE to attend climate conference, Middle East Eye, May 15, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syria-assad-received-invitation-uae-cop28-dubai>

Developments like the improvement in Turkiye-Syria relations after talks in Moscow held in May 2023, hosted by Russia as well as the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Syria to reopen missions and resume flights, all point towards the winds of change blowing across the Middle East.

The restoration of Syria's membership in the Arab League marks a significant shift, considering that just a decade ago, Syrian opposition leader Moaz al-Khatib made a plea for Western support from Syria's suspended seat at the Arab League, as the government of President Assad faced internal challenges. This development represents a complete reversal of the circumstances. Several changes like the realignment of relations in the Arab world, new alliances and partnerships as well as challenges like Syria's significant drug trade particularly the notorious amphetamine Captagon, which has been extensively exported to neighboring countries in recent years have been significant reasons.

To ensure the implementation of key agreements for Syria's reinstatement, a committee comprising Saudi Arabia, and Syria's neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, has been established. Reportedly, this committee aims to monitor and follow-up on various aspects such as amnesty measures, facilitating the return of displaced individuals, combating drug smuggling, and exerting control over the influence of Russia and Iran, who support President Assad. For neighboring countries like Jordan, the issue of cross-border narcotics trade holds immense significance. Syria's readmission into the Arab League coincides with a Jordanian initiative that outlines a roadmap for resolving the conflict in Syria.

In conclusion, the Arab League Summit served as an important platform to review the latest developments in Syria. While it highlighted the urgent need for a political solution and increased humanitarian support, the road to peace remains challenging. Resolving the Syrian crisis requires a concerted and sustained effort from regional and international actors, guided by a commitment to dialogue, cooperation, and the well-being of the Syrian people.