

Saudi Arabia and Syria: Calculating a New Route?

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Leading Arab states, foremost among them Saudi Arabia, have hesitated thus far to normalize their relations with the Assad regime, conditioning this step on Syria's progress toward a political solution based on Security Council Resolution 2254. However, with President Biden's entry into the White House and the accelerated negotiations between the US administration and Iran in the background, a change in the Saudi position on Syria seems possible, including based on reports of Riyadh's contacts with Iran. Renewed relations with the Assad regime could help Arab countries buy influence over Syria and the direction of its policies, thus balancing Iran's power and reducing its influence there. Despite doubts about the prospects for this dramatic move, which could challenge the US administration, normalized relations between Riyadh and Damascus may affect the architecture of the region and serve the interests of those seeking to curb Iranian influence in Syria, led by Israel.

March 2021 marked a decade of war in Syria. Despite Bashar al-Assad's ostensible victory in the war thanks to help from Iran and Russia, Syria is a destroyed country. Assad controls only about 60 percent of its territory, the economic crisis plaguing Syria continues to deepen, and there is no prospect of a political settlement in the foreseeable future. In many ways, the crisis in Syria is a "frozen conflict." However, in recent months a change can be identified regarding relations between some in the Sunni Arab states and Syria. In early May, it was reported that a Saudi delegation led by intelligence chief Khaled Hamidan visited Damascus and met with Assad and Syrian intelligence chief General Ali Mamlouk – a first-of-its-kind meeting. According to the report, an agreement was reached on re-opening a Saudi embassy in Damascus as the first step in normalizing relations, followed by a proposal to reinstate Syria in the Arab League. At the end May, a Syrian delegation arrived in Saudi Arabia for the first public visit since 2011, led by Syrian Tourism Minister Mohamad Martini.

During the decade of war in Syria, many of the Gulf states hoped for the fall of the Assad regime, and some even took an active part in the effort, mainly through military and economic support for rebel organizations. In effect, until recently, the Gulf states, based on their approach to Syria, fell into three main camps:

- Those that accept the Assad regime: The first among the Arab states to renew their relations with the Assad regime were the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, even though early in the civil war they supported the opposition to Assad. The UAE opened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018; it assists the regime financially and is working with Egypt to return Syria under Assad to the Arab League. In October 2020, Oman also returned its ambassador to Damascus. Dubai's comfortable business environment remained a source of attraction for Syrian businessmen throughout the war, and the UAE thus views Syria's reconstruction as harboring significant economic opportunity. Consequently, the UAE strongly opposed the US Caesar Act, which makes it difficult for UAE businesspeople to operate in Syria. The coronavirus pandemic gave Abu Dhabi – which since 2012 has transferred over \$530 million to Syria for humanitarian purposes – an opportunity to increase aid by delivering food, medical equipment, and vaccines. UAE Crown Prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Zayed even spoke with Assad, pledged to help fight the pandemic, and promised that "Syria and her people will not stand alone."
- Opponents of the Assad regime: At the start of the civil war, Qatar supported extremist Islamist rebels. Among the Arab states it has remained, at least on paper, a hawk against the Assad regime, refusing dialogue with it and arguing that the mainly moral-legal considerations that prompted Syria's ouster from the Arab League in 2011 are still valid.
- Those straddling the fence: Other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, have so far hesitated to normalize their relations with the Assad regime and preferred to sit on the fence and follow developments. They conditioned the improvement of their relations with the regime on progress toward a political solution in the country on the basis of Security Council Resolution 2254. While no change was observed in Kuwait, a possible change in Saudi Arabia's attitude toward Syria is evident. Despite the question marks surrounding the prospects for this dramatic move, normalization of relations between the countries at the present time could well serve the interests of both parties.

Assad is grappling with an unprecedented economic crisis and lacks the ability to rebuild the destroyed country. Those who saved his regime, Russia and Iran, cannot help with the vast budgets needed for economic reconstruction; the United States and European countries do not intend to assist in reconstruction unless significant political and social reforms are implemented (in the spirit of Resolution 2254). The Gulf states have therefore become a more relevant source for easing the economic crisis and transferring funds for reconstruction. Beyond that, Assad is working hard to return Syria to the Arab League and strengthen its position in the Arab world, especially after winning the May presidential election (whose credibility is highly questionable), and therefore needs Arab legitimacy for his rule. He also seeks to improve his room to maneuver vis-à-vis Iran and Russia and strengthen Syria's relations with respective Arab countries. Recognition on the part of Saudi Arabia in particular would serve this need.

Still, the question of the validity of the Assad regime remains critical for the Gulf states in particular and the Arab states in general, as they do not want to be portrayed as legitimizing its rule. However, it seems that an understanding is gradually permeating among them that they have the ability to influence what is happening in Syria, if only minimally, and especially to offset Iranian involvement in the country, and therefore should adopt a proactive policy. Arab countries seek to avoid the mistake they made in Iraq in 2003, where they left the arena to increasing Iranian intervention. In Syria, they seek to buy influence over the regime's policies, balance Iran's power, and reduce its influence, as well as limit the Turkish-Qatari influence in the country.

Biden's entry into the White House and the accelerated negotiations between the United States and Iran on the nuclear issue are the main drivers of a process that, in the eyes of Arab countries, could lead to a negative change in the regional balance of power due to Iran's strengthening position. The Gulf states have a clear interest in easing regional tensions, containing damage, and establishing influence where possible – including in Syria.

Implications for Israel

The Gulf states' considerable economic capacity affords them significant leverage over the Assad regime itself and toward third parties – other Arab countries, world powers, and even Israel. Indeed, a possible warming of relations between the Assad regime and Saudi Arabia holds a number of implications for Israel.

Over the years, possible rapprochement between Sunni states and Syria has been discussed as a means of weakening Iran's grip on the country. Since Iran is a common threat to Israel and the Sunni states, this was also in the background of the normalization agreements between Israel and some of these states. For Israel, this also seemed like an opportunity to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran, within the framework of possible Arab recognition of Assad's rule and economic aid to Syria in exchange for a reduced – if not eliminated – Iranian presence in Syria. A more modest goal that may materialize in the framework of the new relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (and possibly later with Saudi Arabia) is the creation of a conduit for conveying messages to the Syrian regime.

However, a closer look at the regional dynamics highlights the complexity of the situation. Along with reports of Saudi-Syrian meetings, there are increasing reports of a thaw in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. So, more than it creates a zero-sum game (Gulf states and Syria against Iran), it seems that Saudi Arabia is hedging risks vis-à-vis a variety of arenas, including through contact with Iran. This should be viewed in light of the US interest in reducing its military presence in the region and reaching an understanding with Iran. If achieved, the regional balance of power will change to the detriment of the Gulf states.

If this is the direction of the Saudi strategy, it has significant implications for Israel. A Gulf-Iranian relationship could jeopardize Israel's efforts to form a regional front to isolate Iran. While Iran and the Gulf states may promote agreements and compromises between them, the Iranian threat against Israel will remain unchanged and even increase. It is also possible that Tehran has allowed the Syrian door to Saudi Arabia to open in order to deepen the Iranian grip, even if that grip is based on Saudi investments that will both prevent Syria from collapsing and set it on the path to reconstruction.

For now, the dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Syria is in very initial stages. Moreover, it is not clear how Iran views the warming of relations between Arab countries and Syria, whether it serves any Iranian interests, and how much the Saudis are willing to invest in Syria, politically and/or economically. Yet in any case, Israel must take advantage of the atmosphere of normalization with the countries in the region and work proactively with the Gulf countries to forge a cohesive front that challenges Iranian subversion. This should complement Israel's ongoing use of military force in Syria (in part through the campaign between wars) in order to remain in the game, particularly in case of a problematic change in the regional architecture.

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