

After 12-Year Suspension, Syrian Regime Is Welcomed Back Into The Arab League

By **M. Mekhoraian and Odeintz** on May 7, 2023 in Cairo, the Arab League decided to allow Syria, headed by the Assad regime, back into the organization. On May 10, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad received an official invitation from Saudi Arabia to participate in the Arab League summit set to be hosted in Jeddah on May 19.^[1] Thus ended a period of nearly 12 years during which Syria's membership in the organization was suspended following the regime's crackdown on the Syrian people when the crisis broke out in the country. Syria's return to the Arab League is the latest high point of Arab rapprochement with its regime; the trend has been intensifying in recent months, particularly since the February 2023 earthquakes in Syria and Turkey.^[2]

In fact, this trend of rapprochement with Syria among the Arab countries, and regret over its suspension from the Arab League, have been underway for several years. MEMRI has published many reports on this trend and on Arab countries' attempts to bring Syria back into the Arab League.^[3] The countries leading this move were the UAE, which officially renewed relations with the Assad regime in December 2018, and Oman, which never severed them. At the same time, Egypt, since President El-Sisi came to power in 2014, has shown relative openness to the Syrian regime and did not consider President Assad's removal as crucial to resolving the Syria crisis. In 2018, Jordan too began strengthening its relations with the Syrian regime, and in 2021 it led an Arab initiative aimed at rehabilitating Assad. In recent months, Saudi Arabia's approach has also shifted; during the first years of the Syrian civil war it was considered the Assad regime's main opponent and supported the armed resistance against it.

Policy Of Isolating Assad Has Failed; Syrian Regime Will Not Draw Away From Iran

Officially, the Arab countries have justified the decision to renew Syria's Arab League membership as part of the Arab-led effort to help it out of its crisis and end the suffering of the Syrian people. In practice, it appears that they have realized that the attempts to bring down the Assad regime have failed and that the latter is not going to comply with conditions set for it in the past requiring it to distance itself from Iran – particularly since on May 3 and 4, a few days before the Arab League decision, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Syria and his visit was presented as a clear and unequivocal message conveyed by Syria about the strength of the Syria-Iran alliance.^[4] Thus, Arab states have figured that it is in the Arab interest to take a more conciliatory approach towards the Syrian regime so as to ease the impact and damage suffered by the Arab countries due to the war in Syria – especially the burden of the Syrian refugees and plague of drugs smuggled onto their soil from Syria.



Cartoon from the Facebook page of Syrian anti-Assad cartoonist 'Ali Ferzat: Assad reinstated in Arab League, sitting on the lap of Iran (Source: Facebook.com/ali.frzat, May 8, 2023)

Saudi Arabia Promoting Reconciliation With Syria Following Reconciliation With Iran

It appears that the final push to agreeing to allow Syria back into the Arab League was Saudi Arabia's reset policy, adopted with the aim of advancing stability in the region to facilitate economic development.^[5] This policy led to the surprising announcement of the renewal of Saudi-Iranian diplomatic relations, under China's auspices, which reflected a strategic turning point in Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran and its allies that was impacting all the balances of power in the region.^[6]

This Saudi-Iran agreement was a deciding factor in the Arab reconciliation with Syria, and the Saudi aspiration to isolate Syria from Iran appears to have dissolved. A Saudi official explained to *Financial Times* that while re-engaging Syria was not a "requisite" of the deal, "I don't think we would have reached out to Syria if we hadn't reached out to Iran."[\[7\]](#)

Actually, Arab media reports since the Saudi-Iran agreement indicate that it was the Saudis who pushed hard for allowing Syria back into the Arab League prior to the summit that they are hosting in Jeddah on May 19. This push came even without anything significant in return from Syria in the matter of stopping the drug smuggling. Additionally, it was reported that Saudi Arabia had offered the Syrian regime \$4 billion as compensation for the losses it would suffer if it stopped the drug trade.[\[8\]](#) The Saudis also pressured the countries that opposed Syria's return to the Arab League, among them Kuwait, Morocco, and, primarily, Qatar, which is known for its funding and arming of the Syrian opposition.[\[9\]](#) The pressure paid off, and the decision to bring Syria back into the Arab League fold was approved without objections by any country at the meeting, to the chagrin of the Syrian opposition.[\[10\]](#)

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt tried to cool the enthusiasm about Syria's return to the League. Jordan has been badly harmed by the war in Syria, primarily by the endless stream of drugs and weapons smuggled into it over the Syrian border by elements affiliated with the pro-Iran militias, and also by the burden of the Syrian refugees it is hosting. Thus, during the deliberations about a Syrian return to the Arab League, Jordan persistently stressed the need for a comprehensive solution to the Syrian crisis by means of a quid-pro-quo approach to the Assad regime.

This is an approach for which Jordan has advocated since 2021, calling for Arab measures in support of the Syrian regime in exchange for its meeting of a number of demands, with the aim of changing the regime's conduct and arriving at a political resolution in the country. The Jordanian initiative of 2021 required, *inter alia*, that the Syrian regime restrict Iran's influence in some areas of Syria and also ensure the withdrawal of foreign forces who entered Syria after 2011. In exchange, the regime was promised a withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country.[\[11\]](#) Now that the Arab countries have approved the quid-pro-quo approach for a resolution in Syria, no steps have been specified; however, the solution was described as intended to bring about the withdrawal of "all illegitimate foreign forces" from the country, which will likely include U.S. forces as well as Iranian militias.[\[12\]](#)

Jordan And Egypt: In The Absence Of Syrian Concessions, Arab League's Decision Will Be Nothing More Than Token Move

Jordan had assessed that without moves on the part of the Assad regime, especially for creating a safe environment for Syrian refugees to return and for stopping the drug smuggling, Syria's return to the Arab League would be a token move of limited effect.[\[13\]](#) In a May 5 interview, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Al-Safadi told CNN: "If we do not see effective measures to curb this threat [*i.e.* drug smuggling], we will do whatever it takes to act against it, including military action inside Syria."[\[14\]](#) Indeed, on May 8, an aerial attack in southern Syria killed a prominent drug dealer with ties to Lebanese Hezbollah; the attack was likely carried out by Jordan.[\[15\]](#)

Meanwhile, Egypt believed that extending an invitation to the Syrian regime to the May 19 Arab League summit in Saudi Arabia should not be done in haste, and called for linking such an invitation to political steps to be taken by the Syrian regime in support of a political solution in the country.[\[16\]](#) Following the decision for Syria's return, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, in an effort to downplay the significance of the move, said in an interview on Egyptian TV that "Syria's return to the Arab League does not authorize full normalization with its government or raising the level of its diplomatic representation. Rather, it is a first step in the creation of a vision, understandings, and steps to build confidence... This is an Arab issue that needs focus, and the Arab countries must respond to it by encouraging the Syrian government to take steps [and offering] steps [by Arab countries] in return."[\[17\]](#)



Cartoon in Qatari daily: The Arab League rolls out a red carpet to Assad with bloody hands and a gas mask (Source: *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, London, April 21, 2023)

At this stage, the Syrian regime, which believes it has the upper hand after the Arab countries renewed relations with it, has not shown willingness to make significant concessions. Regime-affiliated Syrian and Lebanese media presented Syria's return to the Arab League as a victory for the regime, stating that "the winner set the terms" and that the Syrian regime rejected making political concessions in exchange for returning to the Arab League, *i.e.*, instituting reforms in Syria or negotiating with the Syrian opposition.[\[18\]](#) Moreover, it seems the Syrian regime is exploiting Arab countries' distress in dealing with Syrian refugees and the smuggling of drugs into their territories in order to extort them. For example, it was reported that the Syrian regime has linked the return of Syria refugees to Syria to receiving funds for rehabilitating the country. In addition, the Syrian regime has claimed that the drug smuggling issue depends on Arab countries' pressuring the U.S. to lift its sanctions on Syria.[\[19\]](#)

U.S. Green Lights Arab Normalization With Syria

The increasing pace of the rapprochement between Arab countries and the Syrian regime, culminating in its reinstatement to the Arab League, received a very mild response from the U.S., which is itself in the midst of negotiations with Syria.^[20] The U.S. government reiterated that it has no intention of normalizing relations with the Syrian regime and that it does not support its partners and allies in doing so.^[21] However, the U.S. will not punish Arab countries that have renewed relations with the Syrian regime. Moreover, it announced that it has requested that they pursue humanitarian and security objectives from the regime, rather than political ones, in return for the renewal of the relations.^[22] The Arab countries view this as a green light from the U.S. – one that may lead to a lifting of sanctions on the Assad regime.

In contrast, a bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers have just introduced a bill that, if enacted, would bar the U.S. government from recognizing and from normalizing relations with any Syrian government led by Assad, and boosting Washington's ability to impose sanctions. This is meant to deter countries from normalizing relations with the Syrian regime, among other objectives.^[23]

* Y. Yehoshua is MEMRI's Vice President for Research; O. Peri is a research fellow at MEMRI.

[1] Raialyoum.com, May 10, 2023.

[2] See MEMRI reports Inquiry and Analysis No. 1682 – [Following Earthquake In Syria, Arab Rapprochement With Assad Regime Gains Momentum: 'A Consensus Is Forming That Isolating Syria Is No Longer Helpful'](#), March 9, 2023. It should be noted that, on May 1, 2023, President Assad issued a decree to establish the National Fund for Supporting Quake-Affected People. This move triggered concern that the fund would be used to transfer money to the Assad regime in the guise of humanitarian aid while circumventing the U.S. sanctions. According to reports, one Arab country has already provided \$50 million to the fund and another has provided \$15 million, and some countries have pledged to make contributions in the future (almodon.com, May 1, 2023; majalla.com, May 5, 2023).

[3] See MEMRI reports: Inquiry and Analysis No. 1682 – [Following Earthquake In Syria, Arab Rapprochement With Assad Regime Gains Momentum: 'A Consensus Is Forming That Isolating Syria Is No Longer Helpful'](#), March 9, 2023; Inquiry and Analysis No. 1602 – [Jordan, With U.S. Consent, Spearheads Efforts To Return Syrian Regime To Arab Fold](#) – October 19, 2021; Special Dispatch No. 9317, Online Arabic Daily 'Rai Al-Youm': After Years Of Division And Hostility, Saudi Arabia Informs Syrian President Assad It Will Renew Ties, May 4, 2021; Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1476 - Warm Encounter Between Arab League Secretary-General, Syrian Regime Representatives On Margins Of UNGA Reignites Speculation About Syria's Reinstatement In Arab League – October 4, 2019; Special Dispatch No. 7892 – [Syrian Opposition: Arab Rapprochement With Assad Legitimizes His Crimes, Strengthens Iran](#) – February 15, 2019; Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1432 - Debate In Lebanon On Inviting Syria To Arab Economic Summit In Beirut, Normalizing Relations With It – January 18, 2019; Special Dispatch No. 7601 – [Following Assad Regime's Retaking Of Syria-Jordan Border, Jordanian Press Calls To Improve Relations With Syria; Syrian Press Slams Jordan For 'Hypocrisy'](#), August 1, 2018; Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1347 - Egypt Draws Closer To Assad Regime: Openly Participates In Damascus International Fair, Brokers Ceasefire Agreements In Syria – September 21, 2017; Special Dispatch No. 6841, [In Advance Of Arab League Summit In Jordan, Calls In Arab Countries To Reinstate Syria's League Membership; Syrian Writers Reject Calls For Reinstatement, Saying Syria Will Return Only If Arab League Apologizes To It](#), March 23, 2017; Inquiry & Analysis No. 1284, [Growing Egypt-Syria Rapprochement Includes Al-Sisi Statement In Support Of Syrian Army, Reports On Egyptian Military Aid To Syria](#), November 30, 2016; See MEMRI Inquiry & Analysis No. 1274, "The Egypt-Saudi Dispute Over A Resolution To The Syria Crisis Goes Public," October 18, 2016.

[4] Al-Akhbar (Lebanon), May 5, 2023; Al-Thawra (Syria), May 3, 4, 2023.

[5] Al-Akhbar (Lebanon), April 13, 2023; alwatan.com.sa, April 17, 2023.

[6] See MEMRI reports: Special Dispatch No. 10573 - [Repercussions Of Saudi-Iranian Deal: Jordan Is Close To Normalizing Relations With Iran](#) – April 24, 2023; Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1683 - [Following Renewal Of Saudi-Iranian Relations, Debate In Jordanian Press Over Whether Jordan Should Also Reconcile With Iran](#) – March 29, 2023.

[7] Ft.com, May 1, 2023.

[8] Syria.tv, April 25, 2023; almodon.com, April 21, 2023; reuters.com, May 10, 2023. Saudi Arabia denied making this proposal to the Syrian regime.

[9] Al-Akhbar (Lebanon), April 20, 2023; almodon.com, April 21, 2023; raialyoum.com, April 30, 2023.

[10] Qatar explained that it had refrained from objecting to this move because it "always [seeks] to support the achievements of the Arab consensus," but clarified that it does not support normalization with the Assad regime and will not renew its bilateral relations with it (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, London, May 7, 2023).

The Syrian opposition naturally expressed significant dismay at the Syrian regime's reinstatement in the Arab League, arguing that the move serves

Iran. It also expressed great frustration that the Arab countries did not consult them at all in the matter; this failure to consult them is a reflection of the opposition's current weak position ([Twitter.com/JamousBader](#), May 7, 2023; [syria.tv.](#), May 9, 2023).

[11] [Majalla.com](#), May 5, 2023. See also MEMRI report: Inquiry and Analysis No. 1602 – [Jordan, With U.S. Consent, Spearheads Efforts To Return Syrian Regime To Arab Fold](#) – October 19, 2021. It should be noted that UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir O. Pedersen also proposed, in 2021, a "step for step" approach in finding a political solution to the Syria crisis ([Un.org](#), February 9, 2021).

[12] [Al-Ghad](#) (Jordan), May 1, 2023

[13] [Al-Ghad](#) (Jordan), May 3, 2023; [raialyoum.com](#), May 1, 2023.

[14] [Edition.cnn.com](#), May 5, 2023.

[15] [Syriahr.com](#), May 8, 2023. According to some reports, the Jordanian attack was carried out in coordination with the Syrian regime ([Al-Quds Al-Arabi](#), London, [syria.tv](#), May 8, 2023).

[16] [Al-Ghad](#) (Jordan), April 30, 2023.

[17] [Aa.com.tr](#). May 10, 2023.

[18] [Al-Watan](#) (Syria), May 9, 2023; [Al-Akhbar](#) (Lebanon), May 5, 2023. See also MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 10567 - [Editor Of Pro-Hizbullah Lebanese Daily: The Rapprochement Between Syria And The Arab States Is Taking Place At The Behest Of The Latter And On Syria's Terms](#) – April 18, 2023.

[19] [Reuters.com](#), May 10, 2023.

[20] In the recent weeks there have been reports that direct negotiations are taking place between the U.S. and Syria in Amman, focusing on the release of U.S. hostages in Syria, chief of them journalist Austin Tice, who has been missing since 2012, but also touching on political issues ([almodon.com](#), April 15, 2023; [wsj.com](#), May 3, 2023). It should be mentioned that reports about U.S.-Syria discussions on Tice appeared in previous years as well.

[21] [Thenationalnews.com](#), May 8, 2023.

[22] [Whitehouse.gov](#), May 8, 2023; [thenationalnews.com](#), May 2, 2023.

[23] [Reuters.com/world/us-lawmakers-introduce-bill-combat-normalization-with-syrias-assad-2023-05-11](#), May 11, 2023.