



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 16 November 2021

Emirati Normalization with the Syrian Regime: Motives and Implications

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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On 9 November, the UAE Foreign Minister, Abdullah bin Zayed, paid a visit to Damascus, the first in ten years, during which he met the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad and invited him to visit the Syrian pavilion at the Expo 2020 Dubai.¹ This visit comes in the context of a series of steps launched by the UAE in 2018 with the aim of rehabilitating the Syrian regime within a framework of regional normalization efforts that include Jordan, Algeria and other Arab countries.

Evolution of the UAE Position on the Syrian Revolution

With the start of the Syrian revolution in early 2011, like other Gulf states, the UAE saw the Syrian popular movement as an opportunity to contain Iranian influence in the region, so it joined efforts to isolate the Syrian regime within the Arab League and played an important role in supporting the Syrian opposition. The UAE played an active role in the Friends of Syria group, which was formed in early 2012 to resolve the Syrian crisis outside the framework of the Security Council in order to circumvent the Russian and Chinese vetoes in support of the regime.² These efforts did not last long however, and the UAE, which became a prominent counter-revolutionary force, began to take a more fluid position on the Syrian revolution, and began providing aid to the Syrian regime in the context of shifting its view of the conflict in Syria from being an opportunity to contain Iran to being part of the war on terror. In 2014, the US Treasury announced sanctions on the Emirati oil company, Pangates International Corporation Ltd. after it flouted the sanctions enforced against the Syrian regime by supplying its air force with jet fuel.³ Before that, the UAE had turned into a refuge for the capital and financial assets of the Syrian regime and its associates fleeing Western sanctions, despite the official severance of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Syria, starting in early 2012.⁴

The UAE was the first Arab country to participate in bombing Daesh sites in Syria with the launch of the air campaign of the international coalition forces established by Washington in September 2014. This action was justified considering that the organization posed a threat to the Syrian revolution and the Syrian and Iraqi peoples, but the UAE began to coordinate with the Syrian regime. According to Western reports, Syrian surface-to-air missile batteries were being switched to non-operational at the time the Emirati planes were flying in the Syrian skies to target Daesh, in the clearest indication of the strength of coordination between the two parties.⁵ Contrary to the positions of other Gulf countries, the UAE refrained from criticizing the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015. After two months, the UAE position shifted from silence to welcoming the Russian intervention, as the

1 "President al-Assad Receives the UAE Foreign Minister and the Meeting Deals with Bilateral Relations and Ways to Develop Them," Syrian Arab News Agency, 9/11/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3omoXa6>.

2 "The Final Statement of the International Meeting of the Working Group on Economic Reconstruction and Development in the Friends of the Syrian People Group," Syria Economic Working Group, 24/5/2012, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3Djtm42>.

3 "Treasury Sanctions Companies for Aiding the Syrian Regime," Seal of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, 7/9/2014, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3Op5NYZ>.

4 "90% of the Syrian Capital Taken to Arab and Regional Countries," *Al Arabiya Net*, 25/2013/6/, accessed on 14/2021/11/, at: <https://bit.ly/3F9Elxa>.

5 Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "In the UAE, the United States has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed 'Little Sparta,'" *The Washington Post*, 9/12/2014, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/2YjDX1>.

former UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash stated that Russia is targeting a common enemy in Syria.⁶ In 2016, the UAE declared that it shared Russia's vision for a solution in Syria, implying a lack of opposition to the continuation of the Assad regime.⁷

The UAE was the first Arab country to reopen its embassy in Damascus in December 2018.⁸ At the beginning of 2020, the first public phone call took place between Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Bashar al-Assad since the severing of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2012.⁹ As a result, the UAE began sending medical aid to the Syrian regime to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. It also financed the reconstruction of some public buildings, thermal power plants and water networks in Damascus. Western media published details of cooperation between the UAE and the Assad regime to confront Turkey in both Syria and Libya. This included Abu Dhabi's support for the Syrian regime's attempts to keep Turkey busy in Idlib in late 2019 and early 2020, enabling retired Major General Khalifa Haftar to finish off Tripoli.¹⁰

Many link the decision of the eastern Libyan camp to reopen the Libyan embassy in Damascus in March 2020 with the efforts of the UAE to float the regime in Damascus and increase cooperation between Assad and Haftar.¹¹ On 20 October 2021, normalization between the two sides peaked when a phone call between Mohammed bin Zayed and Bashar al-Assad resulted in an agreement that the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah bin Zayed, would visit Damascus. This was preceded by a visit by the Syrian regime's Minister of Economy to Dubai in response to an invitation to participate in the Expo 2020 Dubai.¹²

The UAE's Motives for Normalisation with the Syrian Regime

Emirati normalization with the Syrian regime is part of a strategy that has been evolving for many years and, in addition to rehabilitating the Syrian regime, seeks to facilitate the access of military regimes to power in the Arab world. It also seeks to integrate Israel into the Arab regional system after Abu Dhabi signed a peace agreement and normalized relations with Tel Aviv in September 2020.¹³ There are several reasons behind the acceleration of normalization with the Syrian regime and measures to rehabilitate it, the most important of which is that Abu Dhabi seeks to turn the

6 "UAE says ready to commit troops to fight Daesh in Syria," *Arab News*, 30/11/2015, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3HluKFr>.

7 Samuel Ramani, "How Russia Is Courting the Gulf," *The National Interest*, 1/8/2016, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3wMa84g>.

8 "The UAE reopens its embassy in Damascus," *Al-Bayan*, 28/12/2018, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3qyMGGH>.

9 "Coronavirus: The First Phone call between Assad and Mohammed bin Zayed Since the Start of the Conflict in Syria to Discuss Ways to Stop the Spread of the Epidemic," *BBC Arabic*, 28/3/2020, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bbc.in/3CrmJLP>.

10 Giorgio Cafiero, "UAE boosts Assad as part of anti-Turkey strategy," *Responsible Statecraft*, 16/4/2020, accessed on 14/11/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3cfM5kM>.

11 Ibid.

12 "The UAE and Syria Discuss Developing Economic Relations and Expanding Partnership," *Al-Ain*, 6/10/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3kA6yWn>.

13 "READ: Full text of the Abraham Accords and agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates/Bahrain," CNN, 15/9/2020, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://cnn.it/2Fup3KB>



page on the Arab Spring. There is no doubt that reinstating the most brutal and repressive of Arab regimes will fulfill this purpose. This strategy places the UAE in a position closer to the Russian and Chinese positions (as well as the Israeli position, regarding democratic transition in the Arab world), than to the American and Western position in general. While the UAE claims that its goal in restoring relations with the Syrian regime is to strengthen the Arab presence in Syria to curb Iran's influence, this can hardly be achieved by supporting the Assad regime, Iran's ally. Historically, the Gulf states' support for the Assad regime from the 1970s to 2005 did not alienate Syria from Iran, but rather strengthened the alliance between the two regimes. Furthermore, the UAE is interested in any economic opportunities related to the reconstruction in Syria or the transmission lines for energy provision in the region.¹⁴

The UAE appears to be taking advantage of the weak US stance towards normalization with the Syrian regime to push further in this direction. Washington has already agreed to supply Lebanon with gas and electricity from Egypt (and Israel) and Jordan through Syrian territory by way of the World Bank's financing of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Syrian-Lebanese quartet in this regard, which includes the repair of gas and electricity transmission lines in Syrian territory.¹⁵ In addition, Washington has not demonstrated a firm position in opposing the normalization steps taken by Arab countries with the Syrian regime, limiting its response to asserting that the United States does not support normalization efforts with the Assad regime. The US Secretary of State displayed a similarly lacklustre attitude, stating during a press conference after meeting his Israeli and Emirati counterparts last October that: "What we have not done and what we do not intend to do is to express any support for efforts to normalize relations or rehabilitate Mr. Assad."¹⁶

An Arab Turn towards Normalization with the Syrian Regime

The Emirati move to normalize relations with the Syrian regime is part of a general Arab turn towards rehabilitating the Syrian regime within the Arab regional system, led by Jordan and Algeria alongside the UAE, with different motivations given that Algeria diverges from the UAE stance regarding normalization with Israel. The reactions of the two countries towards the UAE move were in line with this trend. The Algerian Foreign Minister, Ramtane Lamamra, blessed the visit of the Emirati Foreign Minister to Damascus, stressing that he "hopes that it will contribute to overcoming the obstacles between Syria and other Arab countries," and renewed his country's call for the restoration of the Syrian regime within the Arab League.¹⁷

¹⁴ "Emirati-Syrian Rapprochement... Confronting non-Arab parties and an Eye on Reconstruction," *Al-Hurra*, 22/10/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://arbne.ws/3wMUWUU>.

¹⁵ "Lebanese Energy Minister: We are Working with the World Bank to Finance the Electricity Supply Plan," *CNBC Arabic*, 8/9/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3c8KVrh>.

¹⁶ "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Israeli Alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan at a Joint Press Availability," US Department of State, 13/10/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3oydtQN>.

¹⁷ "Algeria Believes that the Time Has Come for Syria to Return to the Arab League," *APS*, 10/11/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3c9JXem>.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi justified the Arab rapprochement with the Assad regime by claiming it to be the result of the absence of any “effective strategy to resolve the Syrian conflict.”¹⁸ Meanwhile, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have expressed some reservations about this approach but officials in the Syrian regime have held political and security meetings with both the Egyptian intelligence director, Abbas Kamel, and the Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, as well as the director of Saudi intelligence Khalid Al-Humaidan.¹⁹ Other than Qatar, there is no Arab opposition to normalization with the Syrian regime, despite all the reasons the Syrian regime was isolated from the Arab world remaining in place, and none of the conditions for its return to the Arab League having been met. This includes the regime’s continuation of its repressive policies and its rejection of any political approach to a solution. On 12 November 2011, the Arab League took the decision to suspend the Syrian regime’s membership in the Arab League, while the withdrawal of Arab ambassadors from Damascus was kept a “sovereign decision of each country.” The resolution was passed with the approval of 18 countries, with 3 countries objecting, namely Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, with Iraq abstaining from voting.²⁰

Conclusion

While there is a general Arab trend forming of normalizing with and rehabilitating the Syrian regime, the UAE is so far the most enthusiastic in this direction, despite being one of the states least affected by the Syrian crisis. The truth is that some Arab countries boycotted the Assad regime, not because of its crimes against its people, but rather because of its relations with Iran, taking advantage of its repressive actions to pursue foreign policy goals. However, they have showed a willingness to normalize with the regime despite the continuation and strengthening of its alliance with Iran. While Jordan’s reasons for normalization with the Syrian regime centre around its economic and security interests and its attempt to find a solution to the presence of about one million Syrian refugees on its territory, the UAE’s motives are almost entirely linked to an “ideological” position that is hostile in principle towards any democratic change and adheres to the stability of authoritarian regimes in the Arab republics in exchange for a rapidly developing alliance with Israel, which includes military and security cooperation, as was indicated by the recent joint manoeuvres that took place in the Red Sea.

¹⁸ “Jordan’s Foreign Minister: We have Restored Interaction with Assad because there is No ‘Effective Strategy’ to Resolve the Conflict in Syria,” CNN Arabia, 11/11/2021, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://cnn.it/3HoFyCl>.

¹⁹ “3 Stations for the “Evolution” of Arab Normalization with the Syrian Regime (Framework),” Anadolu Agency, 11/2021/10/, accessed on 14/2021/11/, at: <https://bit.ly/3Dfs9dL>.

²⁰ “The Arab League Suspends Syria’s Membership and Imposes Political and Economic Sanctions,” *BBC Arabic*, 12/11/2011, accessed on 14/11/2021, at: <https://bbc.in/3kCEZeR>.