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# Syria Normalization: Regional and International Implications

Unit for Political Studies

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## Unit for Political Studies

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Syria has been thrown back into the international spotlight once again, this time through the debate on normalization with the regime of Bashar al-Assad. While previous attempts have been made by certain Arab countries, some of which (Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon) had maintained relations with the Assad regime throughout the crisis, to reinstate Syria's membership to the Arab League prior to the Algiers summit held in November 2022 (in addition to Jordan), opinion remains divided. There are three main trends among the key international powers regarding normalization with Damascus. The first is enthusiastic about normalization and is making steady progress in that direction, either because of domestic considerations, such as Turkey, which faces decisive elections this summer, or because they see it as an opportunity to turn the page on the Arab revolutions once and for all, such as the UAE. The second trend is that of the countries which sets achieving progress towards a political solution as a condition for normalization, which correlates to the policy of the United States and the European Union, as well as Qatar. The third trend, pertaining to the likes of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, is hesitant rather than principled and is monitoring the situation, waiting for a clearer picture to emerge before determining its own position.

## I. The Enthusiasts

Turkey and the UAE are currently among the most enthusiastic about normalization with the Syrian regime, although each of them has its own motivations.

### Turkey

Signs of change in Turkish policy on Syria began with the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015, as Ankara's long-standing policy of regime change in Damascus began to look unrealistic. The alliance established by Washington with the SDF forces to combat ISIS also prompted a change in Turkish priorities in Syria that facilitated Turkish-Russian understandings, the essence of which was Ankara's abandonment of its policy of regime change in Damascus in exchange for Moscow's cooperation to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish entity on the border with Syria. However, the change in Turkish foreign policy has taken a more comprehensive and profound turn in the past two years due to the growing tension in the relationship with Washington since President Biden's administration came to power in early 2021 and the exacerbation of Turkish economic trouble.<sup>1</sup>

Economically, Turkey, like most of the world, is still reeling from the Covid-19 pandemic. Additional structural economic issues have been reflected in the sinking exchange rate of the Turkish currency, which lost about 90% of its value between 2016 and 2022. Ankara is also struggling to manage the growing trade deficit and high inflation, which, stands now at more than 80%, exacerbated by the

<sup>1</sup> Aslı Aydıntağbaşı & Jeremy Shapiro, "Biden and Erdogan are Trapped in a Double Fantasy," *Foreign Policy*, 6/1/2021, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CUrukP>.



war in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> These political, economic and security challenges prompted President Erdogan to make sweeping foreign policy changes in his foreign policy, including improving relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Egypt, Iran, and elsewhere. Although the reversal of Turkish policy on Syria appears to correlate with its new regional approach more generally, the relationship with Syria is also specifically affected by its bitter conflict with the Syrian regime, which pushed about 3.7 million Syrian refugees into Turkey.

As a result of these economic troubles, the issue of the Syrian refugees has become a subject of heated debate in Turkish society, which the opposition has exploited to undermine the position of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. The opposition have stoked racism towards Syrian refugees, blaming them for the economic hardships, to the point that this issue has become a central issue for the electoral campaign for the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for next May. On the other hand, the AKP, which suffered a heavy electoral defeat in 2019 when it lost the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara in the local elections, is seeking to take the refugee card back from the opposition by using the burden of hosting refugees as a scapegoat for the country's economic problems and pledging to repatriate about a million Syrians, the implementation of which requires cooperation with the Syrian regime.

With the US steadfast in its rejection of any Turkish military operation against the SDF, cooperation with Russia and the Syrian regime also emerged as the best option for Ankara to contain the threat posed by Kurdish militias on its borders. Turkey thus offered to help the Syrian regime regain control of the areas it lost to the SDF, especially in northern and north-eastern Syria. This shift allowed a meeting between the defence ministers and the intelligence chiefs of Turkey and the Syrian regime to take place in Moscow in December 2022, while efforts are currently being made to hold the first meeting between the foreign ministers of the two parties.

## UAE

The UAE, like other Gulf countries, saw the popular Syrian revolution in 2011 as an opportunity to contain Iranian influence in the region. It joined efforts to isolate the Syrian regime within the Arab League and played a role in supporting the Syrian opposition. But the Emirati position changed radically with the transformation of Abu Dhabi into an avowed opponent of the Arab revolutions, and it distanced itself from the Syrian opposition before eventually pledging support for the Syrian regime under the cover of humanitarianism and pursuing political and security rapprochement. The Emirati perspective on the conflict in Syria thus shifted from seeing it as an opportunity to contain Iran to being part of the war on terrorism. Accordingly, the UAE reopened its embassies in Damascus in December 2018. In early 2020, the first public phone call took place between the then Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, and the head of the Syrian regime since the severance

<sup>2</sup> "Inflation in Turkey is close to 80%...the highest level in a quarter of a century," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 3/8/2022, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3DJbm5b>.



of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2012. According to Western media, the two parties agreed on a strategy to confront Turkey in both Syria and Libya, within which the UAE asked the Syrian regime to occupy Turkey in Idlib to enable retired Major General Khalifa Haftar to finish off Tripoli. In November 2021, the UAE's foreign minister, Abdullah bin Zayed, made his first visit to Damascus in ten years. In March 2022, Bashar al-Assad made his first visit to an Arab country since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution to Abu Dhabi, after which Abdullah bin Zayed followed up with a visit to Damascus in December 2022.

Emirati normalization with the Syrian regime is part of a general strategy to close the book on the Arab revolutions once and for all, stabilize the ruling regimes, and integrate Israel into the Arab regional system. Abu Dhabi signed a peace agreement and normalized relations with Tel Aviv in September 2020. The Emiratis are also seeking economic opportunities in Syria in the post-war and reconstruction phase. Abu Dhabi likely wants to be involved in the mediation between Turkey and the Syrian regime, and between the Syrian regime and Israel, competing with Russia to arrange meetings between Erdogan and Assad.

## II. Opponents to Unequivocal Normalization

There is a group of countries that reject a wholesale normalization with the Syrian regime without any concessions on the part of the latter. This group includes the United States and the European Union, as well as Qatar as the most prominent Arab state.

### United States

As some of its regional allies move closer to normalizing relations with the Syrian regime, Washington has so far rejected any steps in that direction that are not accompanied by progress towards a political solution based on Security Council resolutions (especially 2254).<sup>3</sup> Following a meeting that brought the Turkish and Syrian defence ministers together in Moscow last December, US State Department Spokesperson, Ned Price, said that “We will not normalize and we do not support other countries normalizing relations with the Assad regime,” and that US support for this approach remains contingent on a political solution led by Syria and in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>4</sup>

The US sanctions are the most prominent obstacles to normalization with the Syrian regime, which other countries pursuing normalization merely have to take into consideration. The “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019”, which came into force on 17 June 2020, provides for the sanctioning of all those who provide military, financial and technical support to the Syrian regime, whether

<sup>3</sup> “The United States asks all countries not to normalize with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,” *France 24*, 4/1/2023, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3j8KYuj>.

<sup>4</sup> “Department Press Briefing – January 5, 2023” US Department of State, 5/1/2023, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3R9cogf>.



people, states or companies.<sup>5</sup> On 23 December 2022, US President Joe Biden signed the “Captagon Act”, which labels the drug trade linked to the Assad regime a transient security threat, and calls for a written strategy within 180 days to disrupt and dismantle drug production and trafficking networks associated with the Assad regime in Syria.<sup>6</sup>

## The European Union

The EU, for its part, remains consistent in its refusal to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, seeking instead to push Damascus towards serious negotiations in order to reach a political solution to the crisis. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, Josep Borrell addressed the European Parliament in Brussels 2021, stressing that EU members could not pursue normalization with the Syrian regime, or lift sanctions against it until a political transition that meets the requirements of Security Council resolutions has been enforced.<sup>7</sup> In mid-2022, the EU renewed the sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime for another year due to its “continued repression of the civilian population.”<sup>8</sup> And in early 2023, the EU sent a message of “three nos” in response to efforts to rehabilitate the Syrian regime — no to normalization, no to reconstruction, and no to lifting sanctions.<sup>9</sup> This update came within the context of the Turkish rapprochement with the Syrian regime, in line with the US position rejecting any such rapprochement.<sup>10</sup>

## Qatar

For Doha, all the reasons for isolating the Syrian regime remain intact, including the regime’s continuation of its repressive policies and its rejection of any political approach to the solution. Qatar’s Emir, Sheikh Tamim Al Thani, has repeatedly expressed his rejection of attempts to “turn the page on the tragedy of the Syrian people for nothing in return and ignore their great sacrifices without a solution that brings about its aspirations and the unity of his country.”<sup>11</sup> He also stressed that “the Arab League decided to exclude Syria for a good reason,” and that that reason has not changed. On 12 November 2011, the League decided to suspend the Syrian regime’s membership and requested Arab countries to make a “sovereign decision” to withdraw ambassadors from Damascus. This decision was passed with the approval of 18 countries, in contrast to the objection of 3 countries — Syria, Lebanon and Yemen — while Iraq abstained from voting.

<sup>5</sup> “H.R.31 - Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019,” Library of Congress, 1/3/2019, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3wvvdAl>

<sup>6</sup> “H.R.6265 - Captagon Act,” Library of Congress, 14/12/2021, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Ha9YcP>

<sup>7</sup> “The European Union: No normalization with the Syrian regime and no lifting of sanctions against it until a political transition in accordance with Security Council resolutions,” *Al Jazeera*, 3/10/2021, accessed on 2/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3klUepB>.

<sup>8</sup> Amin Al-Assi, “Europe’s Nos to Assad: Normalization is not possible without a political solution,” *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 19/1/2023, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3wpwJr>.

<sup>9</sup> “The European Union renews its position rejecting normalization with the Syrian regime,” *Syria News*, 18/1/2023, accessed on 2/5/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3H7698j>.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Assi

<sup>11</sup> “His Highness the Emir Interview with the French magazine *Le Point*,” *Qatar News Agency*, 14/9/2022, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3YqsWTr>.



### III. The Slow to Act

These countries are not opposed to normalization in principle but for various strategic or practical reasons have been hesitant to fully engage in the rehabilitation process.

#### Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has expressed reservations about the implications of normalization with the Syrian regime, despite visits and meetings between Syrian security officials and their counterparts in Saudi Arabia. Most recently in December, according to the regime aligned *Al-Watan* newspaper, the head of the General Intelligence Department (State Security), Major General Husam Muhammad Louka visited Saudi Arabia.<sup>12</sup> But last year, Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt and Qatar, actively obstructed the efforts of some Arab countries to reinstate Syria's membership to the Arab League at the Algiers Summit. Riyadh justified its position by noting the continued "Iranian interference that prevents Syria from returning to the Arab region," and the existence of "Arab and international decisions that, when implemented, will lead to the kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] and all Arab countries to anticipate the reinstatement of Syria and the Syrian people."<sup>13</sup>

However, indications have recently emerged of the possibility of a change in the Saudi position on normalization. In a press interview in mid-January 2023, the Saudi foreign minister referred to normalization efforts with the regime in Damascus, emphasizing the need for countries in the region to "work together to find a political solution to the 12-year-old civil war," adding, "We are working with our partners to find a means to engage with the government in Damascus in a way that offers concrete steps toward a political solution, and that will take some work."<sup>14</sup> These statements came after a rare meeting between Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan and the UN envoy to Syria, Geir Pedersen, alongside the World Economic Forum in Davos on 18 January 2023. Notably, these statements coincided with the lifting of the Syrian regime's ban on importing Saudi products, signalling the resumption of economic relations with Riyadh, which had been suspended since 2012. In reality, there is no principled transformation in the Saudi position, which, since Prince Muhammad bin Salman took power, has not opposed normalization with the Syrian regime. Any changes are related to timing and assessments of how normalization will affect Iranian influence in Syria.

#### Egypt

Meetings have become frequent between Syrian officials and the Egyptian Intelligence Chief, Abbas Kamel, and Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, who, for the first time in ten years, met with his Syrian

<sup>12</sup> "The UAE leads efforts to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Assad," *Al-Modon*, 24/1/2023, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3HBLUQ6>.

<sup>13</sup> "Saudi Arabia: Iranian interference hinders Syria's return to the Arab world," *Al-Souria Net*, 11/5/2022, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3Ygwaca>.

<sup>14</sup> "Saudi Foreign Minister: We are working to find a way to deal with the Syrian government," *RT Arabic*, 19/1/2023, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3JD6v9v>.





counterpart, Faisal Mekdad, in September 2021, alongside a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.<sup>15</sup> But the Egyptian position appears, at least in public, to be consistent with the Saudi position, in the sense that it is in no rush to normalize relations with the Syrian regime, while not opposing the idea in principle. In a joint statement issued after the meeting of the Political Consultation Committee between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in Cairo in mid-December 2022, the two countries indicated that they support a political solution in Syria in accordance with Resolution 2254 and reject any threats of military operations affecting Syrian lands and terrorizing the Syrian people, referring to the possibility of Turkey launching a military operation in northern Syria. The statement indicated that the two parties agreed on “the necessity of supporting the preservation of Syria’s independence and territorial integrity, combating terrorism, the repatriation of refugees and displaced persons, reaching a political solution to the existing crisis in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2254, and supporting the efforts of the UN envoy to advance the political process in Syria.”<sup>16</sup> Egypt had been in favour of reinstating Syria’s Arab League membership as early as 2022, but shifted towards the Saudi position, which opposed this return until very recently following Riyadh’s reception of Syrian Intelligence Chief and the 2022 China-Arab States Summit last December.

## Jordan

Jordan’s position has continuously evolved since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Amman has gone from being the host of the Military Operations Center (MOC) to support the Syrian opposition factions in 2012 to being the most vocal advocate of normalization with the Syrian regime. The reasons for this are mostly rooted Jordanian economic and security interests and its attempt to find a solution for the nearly 700,000 Syrian refugees residing in the resource deprived country. In July 2021, King Abdullah visited Washington to discuss his vision for a step-by-step policy of normalization with the Syrian regime, which the king said was still in power and should be dealt with as such.<sup>17</sup> During the visit, the King obtained Washington’s approval for a project to supply Lebanon with gas and electricity from Egypt and Israel through Jordan and Syria, and exempt Jordan from the aforementioned Caesar Act. In September 2021, the two parties agreed to reopen the Jaber-Nasib border crossing, and negotiations related to trade, energy and agriculture are back on the table during the visits of Syrian government ministers to Amman following the first public phone call between Assad and King Abdullah in October 2021. But Jordanian normalization attempts have faltered since an increase in drug smuggling to Jordan was recorded along with the presence of Iranian affiliated militias close to Iran on the borders.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Jordan continues to work to convince powers from both the East and the West to accept the idea of normalization with the regime as a *fait accompli*.

<sup>15</sup> “The first meeting between the foreign ministers of Egypt and Syria... Mekdad: Historical ties unite us,” *CNN Arabic*, 25/9/2021, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3juB2eU>.

<sup>16</sup> “Riyadh and Cairo: We reject the threat of military operations in Syria and support the political solution,” *Syria TV*, 15/1/2023, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3i0I58N>.

<sup>17</sup> “Jordan stresses cooperation with Egypt and Iraq to enhance regional stability,” *Al-Watan*, 23/7/2021, accessed on 5/2/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3X82UmV>.

<sup>18</sup> Aqil Hussein, “Sources: A Jordanian coup against Assad in Washington... Did King Abdullah request a safe zone in the south?,” *Al-Watan*, 26/5/2022, accessed on 2/5/2023, at: <http://bit.ly/3X82UmV>.



## IV. The Syrian regime

Despite the chronic weaknesses it faces in controlling the state and its bankruptcy, the Syrian regime deals with the ongoing normalization efforts with it as a victor. This is clear in the conditions it sets for normalization with Turkey, which include pledging a complete withdrawal from Syrian territory, ceasing support for the political and military opposition, and aiding in reconstruction and mitigating the impact of Western sanctions imposed on Damascus. The regime has also demanded a resumption of political relations with Arab countries in return for lifting the siege on areas that are still under the control of the opposition and the air strikes against its civilian base, thus demanding political concessions in return for humanitarian “concessions”. In this way, the regime is trying to conceal its weak position, particularly its economic conditions, given the inability or unwillingness of its allies to help it. Recently, the regime has been forced to shut down schools, factories, and public agencies due to the lack of fuel needed to secure transportation and heating, while many areas suffer from a complete or partial lack of electricity, which has prompted complete economic paralysis. Regime areas in particular suffer from difficult living conditions, represented by the unprecedented rise in food prices, and a roughly 150% rise in inflation over the past year, coinciding with the collapse of the Syrian pound against the US dollar, which lost about 35% of its value (falling to 7,000 SYP against 1 USD, compared to 4,500 in early October 2022). This pushed 90% of Syrians below the poverty line. A recent UN report noted that half of Syrians (12 million people) do not know where their next meal is coming from, while 2.5 million Syrians are at risk of sliding into hunger, which means that about 80% of Syrians are now food insecure. The report ranks Syria sixth most food insecure country globally.<sup>19</sup> Despite the threat of an uprising fuelled by hunger, with signs of dissatisfaction emerging even from its strongholds, the Syrian regime continues to tread with arrogance, bolstered by promises of unconditional normalization. That some Arab countries are pursuing normalization with the Syrian revolution while it is in its darkest hour and in its weakest position to date, represents a remarkable historical paradox.

## Conclusion

Regional and international positions on normalization with the Syrian regime vary, along with assessments about its feasibility. Doubts persist about its ability or will to provide any concessions, despite the continued deterioration of its situation and that of its political and economic allies. The regime is now virtually unable to bear the burden of providing food (in addition to electricity and fuel) to the nearly 9 million Syrians living under its control, and it has come to depend almost entirely on humanitarian aid provided by the United Nations and its associated agencies, thus placing the responsibility for feeding them with the international community, all the while tightening its grip on an establishment that has become incapable of carrying out its most basic functions.

<sup>19</sup> “Syria Country Brief”, World Food Program, November 2022, accessed on 05/02/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3RAG0TT>