

Syria's Normalization and the GCC: Adjusting to A New Modus Vivendi

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May 10, 2023

Also available in

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Brief Analysis

Though GCC member states may disagree on Syria's normalization, the collective memory of past conflicts and the desire for regional stability will likely override internal divisions.

On April 18, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud made a historic visit to Damascus, meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the first official trip of a high-ranking Saudi royal to Syria since the two countries severed diplomatic ties in 2011. The meeting covered (blank) several thorny issues, from the need for a “comprehensive political settlement of the Syrian crisis” to “the return of Syria to its Arab surroundings” and the “return of Syrian refugees and displaced persons.”

On the same day, the UAE and Qatar announced that work is underway between the two countries to restore full bilateral relations (blank) and reopen embassies. Although the three-and-a-half-year blockade of Qatar by a small coalition of countries including the UAE formally ended in January 2021 with the al-Ula declaration, it took more than two years for the UAE and Qatar to now pursue a more substantive diplomatic normalization process.

These moves to improve bilateral ties occur amid a broader regional push to stabilize the Middle East after a turbulent decade. At the moment, two distinct but equally-relevant reconciliation effort tracks are taking place, with member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) taking center stage. On the one hand, the GCC countries are de-escalating tensions with deep-seated regional rivals and competitors in order to promote durable stability in the GCC's immediate neighborhood. On the other hand, the GCC monarchies are taking steps to ease internal frictions and defuse future clashes within the GCC itself.

The readmission of Assad to the Arab fold is where these two tracks of regional diplomacy intersect, bearing far-reaching implications for the overall stability of the Middle East and the success of the current de-escalation momentum.

From Regime Change to Regime Embrace

Syria was suspended from the Arab league in 2011 against the backdrop of the Assad regime's cruel repression of street protests. At the time, some Arab states even supported armed rebel groups who hoped to oust Assad. After obtaining a lifeline in the form of a joint Russian-Iranian military intervention, however, the Assad regime went on to achieve a major victory in Aleppo in early 2017 and has gradually regained control over much of the country since. Albeit grim, the Assad regime's survival has become a de facto reality in war-torn Syria.

Still, Syria has remained on shaky ground in the regional sphere. The country's long-lasting allies—namely Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah—did prove critical in ensuring the regime's military victory on the ground, but there is not much they can do to shore up Syria's massive legitimacy deficit and to bankroll the multi-million reconstruction endeavors needed across the country. Beset by crippling sanctions and existing as a pariah in its own neighborhood, Assad has long hoped to expand its club of friends to ensure the regime's long-term survival.

Gathered in Jeddah on April 15 to discuss Syria's future within the Arab League, the foreign ministers of the GCC countries, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan initially **failed (blank)** to reach a consensus on the path ahead, revealing some underlying frictions within the Arab camp. On May 7, the Arab foreign ministers reunited at the Arab League's headquarters in Cairo, and the high-level officials voted to reinstate Syria's membership. Although the decision ended Syria's 11-year-long diplomatic isolation and paved the way for Assad's **participation (blank)** in the next Arab League Summit on May 19 in Saudi Arabia, the rehabilitation process still reflects a fragmented reality among Arab states. Indeed, only 13 of the 21 Arab League's effective members attended the voting session and gave the green light to the normalization motion.

Polarization within the Arab Fold

Once one of the staunchest supporters of regime change in Syria, Saudi Arabia has carefully pursued a radical U-turn in its policies over the past several months. On several recent occasions, the Saudi Foreign Minister has reiterated that Arab countries were gradually converging on the idea of dialogue channels with Damascus. The Foreign Minister has also made statements suggesting that Syria's isolation was proving fruitless. His state visit to Damascus in mid-April left no doubt about the Saudi repositioning on the Syrian file. Ultimately, with Saudi Arabia agreeing to **resume (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-resumes-work-its-diplomatic-mission-syria-2023-05-09/>)** diplomatic activities at its embassy in Damascus on May 9, the Saudi-Syrian rapprochement is making momentous strides. Once foes, now friends, Saudi Arabia and Syria are heading hastily toward the re-establishment of full bilateral ties. The Kingdom's about-face suggests a high-level recalculation of the viable foreign policy tools that Riyadh has in regards to Assad. Believing that political and economic isolation has failed, Saudi Arabia now seeks to build influence over Assad by extending him an olive branch.

Although Saudi Arabia is now leveraging its solid diplomatic credentials to hasten Syria's return to the Arab fold, the UAE and Bahrain laid the groundwork for the normalization process by reopening their embassies in Damascus in late 2018. While Abu Dhabi and Manama initially kept diplomatic representations at the level of chargé d'affaires, these overtures bore a heavily symbolic message: the Syrian regime still had friends in the GCC. Since then, the UAE has done most of the heavy lifting to re-legitimize Assad. Positioning itself as the spearhead of normalization, the UAE has scaled up its bilateral interactions with Syria, sending Foreign Minister Abdallah bin Zayed al-Nahyan to Damascus on several occasions. Assad has now been received twice by UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan since early 2022. The intensity of diplomatic engagement between the Emirati and Syrian leadership speaks volumes about the UAE's pivotal role in leading the normalization process.

Among the GCC countries pushing back on the normalization of Syria, Qatar stands out as the most vocal. While it does not oppose the idea per se, Doha **maintains (blank)** that a potential diplomatic overture to Assad must result

from tangible improvements by the regime in dealing with opposition groups and reforming the Syrian political architecture. From the Qatari standpoint, Assad has made no meaningful efforts to ease the violent repression of dissidents, and the conditions for his regime's ostracization still stand.

Although more moderate in its resistance than Qatar, Kuwait has also manifested some reservations about Assad's return to the Arab fold. Due to its composite sectarian demography, the Syrian file remains a highly contentious issue in the eyes of the Kuwaiti public. Still, Kuwait has no tradition of being a bold player in Middle Eastern politics, and it typically crafts its foreign policies by seeking consensus within regional multilateral organizations such as the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation, and the GCC. With Saudi Arabia taking up the baton of Assad's rehabilitation, Kuwait will likely take advantage of the current thaw to carefully test the waters domestically and regionally.

Regarding Oman, the country has long preferred a neutral stance (blank) towards the Syrian civil war, stressing the conflict's humanitarian dimensions. Like its Arab peers, Oman did scale down its diplomatic representation in Syria in 2012, but it has adamantly refrained from taking bold positions on Syrian domestic affairs and has never entirely severed relations with Damascus. As the first GCC country to reinstate (blank) its ambassador to the Syrian capital in early October 2020, Oman is now openly supporting Syria's reintegration into the Arab League. Assad's state visit (blank) with Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq al-Said in late February reflects the warm ties between the two leaders and underscores Oman's support for the normalization push.

New Contours of GCC Politics

Having divergent strategic priorities and pursuing opposing outcomes is not unusual among the GCC members. Since its foundation in 1981, the GCC has experienced numerous stress tests challenging its survival. However, frictions have never reached the point of no return, and no member states have ever defected.

While the 2021 al-Ula summit brought an end to the most recent, three-year-long GCC spat, it also contributed to reshaping the contours of GCC politics. By welcoming Qatar back into the GCC, Arab Gulf monarchies informally ushered in a new status quo in which each GCC member has the right to pursue an independent foreign policy and any attempts to impose hegemonic views are rejected. Of course, though the GCC members have made significant strides in achieving a durable modus vivendi capable of accommodating different political agendas, there is much work to do to fully overcome the type of internal conflicts that have ripped them apart in the past.

Efforts to rebuild mutual trust within the GCC are still at an early stage, and unresolved divergences on burning issues such as Syria's normalization might prompt the Arab Gulf monarchies to resume old disruptive habits. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia's proactive diplomacy (blank) over the Syrian file reflects the Kingdom's resolve to shore up its regional leadership credentials. As the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iranian rapprochement deal and de-escalation talks with the Houthis lighten the burden on Riyadh, the Kingdom might perceive the current geopolitical moment as favorable to a more assertive Saudi role in the Arab world. On the other hand, Qatar continues to view bold moves by its regional neighbors with suspicion. With the 2017 blockade's symbolic wounds barely healed, any push to dictate hegemonic postures will evoke bitter memories for Doha.

So far, the GCC members have shown enough resolve to handle internal dissent on Syria's political future peacefully. Qatar still retains its steadfast opposition (blank) to normalization with Assad, but it has also refrain (blank)ed from playing an antagonist role to the Saudi-backed normalization push within the Arab League. Heeding the lessons learned from previous clashes, the Arab Gulf monarchies are approaching their apparently irreparable frictions on the Syrian file with caution and pragmatism.

What Next?

The Assad regime's normalization still strongly polarizes the GCC. However, given the current geopolitical realities,

the already-significant diplomatic resources spent to nurture the regional thaw, and the widespread desire for durable stability, it is unlikely that the Arab Gulf monarchies will bring the conflict over Syria's political future to the extreme, jeopardizing their recently restored unity. The common desire to build security and stability seems to have prevailed over centrifugal forces and zero-sum thinking, further reinforcing the GCC's most salient feature: its members' capacity to retain a minimum degree of consensus on mutual interests.

The Syrian regime still suffers a substantial legitimacy deficit on the international stage. The United States and European countries have not done much to dissuade their partners in the Middle East from normalizing with Assad, however they intend to stand by Syrian sanctions unless the regime takes concrete steps towards a political solution to the civil conflict based on the UN Security Council Resolution 2254. As a result, Arab states will be significantly exposed to Western sanctions as they seek to take advantage of lucrative reconstruction deals and enhanced economic exchanges with Syria. Faced with this reality, the GCC members who have assumed an active role in rehabilitating Assad will likely carefully hedge between measured engagement on symbolic issues and a wait-and-see approach.

Ultimately, the dynamics unleashed by the recent flurry of diplomatic activism in the Middle East speak to a growing resolve among regional geopolitical players to rebuild agency in their neighborhood. Although it is still unclear to what extent the Arab states will be able and willing to fully reincorporate the Assad regime into the fold, this collective endeavor illustrates a new phase in the Middle East in which appeasing dialogue and mutually beneficial cooperation have replaced head-on confrontation and stiff rivalry. While conflicting views and underlying tensions continue to represent a major reality of GCC politics, as exemplified by Qatar's hardline anti-Assad stance, the Arab Gulf monarchies have manifested a strong resolve to compartmentalize dissent and pursue a good neighborliness policy with fellow GCC members. ❖

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