

# The Reality of Normalization with Assad: Syrians' Perspectives

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**The growing regional trend of normalization with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria—including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even Turkey—have stoked the anger of the Syrian opposition.**

**E**specially among the Syrian diaspora, many are suspicious of these steps towards normalization and the conflicting interests underlying them. In the case of Turkey, for example, the perceived threat of Syrian Kurds—particularly the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—is what drives the push for closer ties with the regime. Regarding Saudi Arabia, many Syrians believe that the Kingdom's desire to maintain influence among Bedouin tribes in Syria and appease their recent ally Iran are the main motivations for their normalization.

Already, Syrians both in and out of the country have come out to **demonstrate (<https://www.youtube.com/live/xPODbwLpJjM?feature=share>)** against this normalization. Nevertheless, the divergent agendas of the various Syrian opposition groups have made it difficult for a unified opposition platform to engage with the international and regional communities and win support.

The real question in light of these developments is to what extent Assad is willing and able to abide by the conditions imposed by the Arab League in order to rejoin the fold. The most important of these conditions involve the Syrian refugee crisis and the Syrian state's trafficking of the drug Captagon.

## Will Assad Agree to Refugee Repatriation?

Many experts see the Syrian refugee crisis as a direct result of the Assad regime's policies of forced displacement and violent discrimination against the Syrian opposition—policies that sought to eliminate incubators of popular revolutionary activity beginning with the 2011 Syrian Revolution. Is it realistic to expect the regime to now allow these same opposition figures back into the country with no resentment or retaliation?

If refugees are repatriated, they will no doubt demand, at a minimum, the return of their assets, which were **seized (<https://zagrosnews.net/ar/news/42978>)** by the regime through Law 10 and other legislative decrees that stripped opposition members of their possessions and redistributed them among pro-regime elites. Sources indicate that some of these assets were likewise given to Iranian immigrants and Hezbollah entities who came to Syria in recent years.

Even if these enormous barriers are overcome, many Syrians are sceptical that Syriarealistically cope with the increased pressures that repatriation would put on the country's already-collapsing infrastructure.

## Realistically Addressing Captagon

The Assad regime has transformed Syria from a developing country to a hub of drug manufacturing and distribution. Captagon production and smuggling has become a lifeline for the Assad family during their decade of isolation, providing a key source of funding and foreign currency that allows the regime elites to endure despite deteriorating economic conditions throughout the rest of the country. The regime does not have an alternative revenue besides drug production, and it relies on this revenue to control its mercenary militias, various security institutions, and the 4th Armored Division of the Syrian army, led by the

president's brother Maher al-Assad.

According to data from the most recent [studies \(https://go.shr.lc/3OT6uB4\)](https://go.shr.lc/3OT6uB4), there are more than 160 gangs working in drug smuggling in Syria. Leaked information suggests that there are around 100 production sites for drug manufacturing in southern Syria alone.

A source close to the regime likewise claimed that the process of manufacturing and smuggling Captagon occurred through an organized network reminiscent of the opaque and interconnected structures of Syria's security institutions. These activities operate under what we might call "The General Administration for Captagon Affairs," which is also under the direct oversight of Maher al-Assad. As this source explained: "No one can escape or report this interwoven network; everyone is caught up in it and everyone benefits from it."

Although Jordan recently [targeted \(https://israel-alma.org/2023/05/08/unusual-jordanian-air-attack-on-captagon-industry-targets-in-southern-syria-may-8-2023/\)](https://israel-alma.org/2023/05/08/unusual-jordanian-air-attack-on-captagon-industry-targets-in-southern-syria-may-8-2023/) two drug manufacturing centers in Syria with airstrikes, these strikes are suspected to have occurred in coordination with the Syrian regime in order to demonstrate the regime's good will as normalization ramps up. The strikes likewise benefited Assad by settling scores with certain regime cronies, and sending a message to tighten the ranks to prevent disintegration. This is a well-established [strategy \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2586%25D8%25B8%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B9%25D8%25A7%25D9%2582%25D8%25A8-%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D9%2585%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D8%25B4%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2586%25D8%25B8%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A-%25D9%258A%25D8%25B9%25D8%25A7%25D9%2582%25D8%25A8-%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D9%2585%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D8%25B4%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA) for the regime.

With regard to foreign policy, Captagon is a card that the Assad regime can continue to play to keep the upper hand in negotiations with its Arab neighbors.

### **How Will Syrians Respond to Arab normalization?**

Though the Syrian opposition remains far from unified, their rejections of the recent normalizations with the Assad regime are universal. Official propaganda, of course, has hailed Assad for his success and steadfastness in the face of difficulty and in his ongoing struggle as the leader of the Arab resistance against Israel. Several interviews conducted with Syrians inside the country help elucidate the way in which this movement towards normalization is being viewed.

According to a researcher based in Syria, this propaganda campaign "began with leaking various confidential remarks in order to shift public opinion in Syria towards accepting rapprochement" and included superficial changes to the regime network "so that the figures associated with the previous crisis are no longer in the public eye." In the end, though, the researcher noted that "the rest will stay as it is."

Even one Assad supporter within Syria described Arab normalization as a "futile project" since Assad cannot do what his Arab neighbors are asking. Syrians have likewise mocked Assad for returning empty-handed from the Arab League summit, bringing neither bags of money nor the promise of Arab investments that would help mitigate the crippling economic crisis in Syria or back the Syrian pound, which continues to fall.

The director of an educational institution in Syria stated: "We were hoping things would get a little easier, that prices would fall and services would become more readily available. However, Assad came back from the summit instead with new price hikes for basic commodities, oil, and gas, plus longer electricity cuts." She sarcastically remarked that "it's clear that the people aren't ever going to get anything, just new dresses for the 'lady of anise'"—a sarcastic play on First Lady Asma al-Assad's nickname in the press, "lady of jasmine."

It has become clear to Syrians that any hope of a way out is vanishing, especially in the context of great power competition and the emergence of a multipolar world. Speculating on the strategies of regional powers in this era of normalization, one Syrian noted that Saudi Arabia was likely engaging in normalization in line with its rapprochement with Iran. Fearful of any Iranian retribution that may target Saudi territory, the Kingdom views normalization through the lens of its own self-interest and preservation at the expense of the Syrian people.

Considering the divergent paths towards normalization pursued by countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Syrians are likewise concerned that they will get caught in the middle. Should the priorities and agendas of separate normalization processes conflict, Syrians will once again pay the price.

### **Perspectives on U.S. Policy**

With regard to the United States' position on normalization, Syrians in the diaspora appreciate continued U.S. opposition to normalization as well as the United States' efforts to call out other nations for courting the Assad regime. This is particularly true in light

of the recent deliberations in Congress about a “Captagon act” to counter Assad. Syrians have also been calling for the implementation of the Caesar Act and assurances that humanitarian aid to Syria reaches those in need without passing through regime channels.

Despite the bleak possibilities ahead of them, Syrians opposed to the Assad regime have hope that these recent normalization efforts will ultimately fail. Knowing Assad’s spiteful mentality and unwillingness to give up any strategic victories—including the advantageous demographic shifts that have taken place in the wake of the regime’s forced displacement of citizens—many Syrians are confident that Assad will not live up to any of the **preconditions**

[https://www.alhurra.com/jordan/2023/04/14/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2586-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AF%25D9%2581%25D8%25B9-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25AE%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25B3%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585-%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D9%2586%25D9%2587%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7\)](https://www.alhurra.com/jordan/2023/04/14/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A3%25D8%25B1%25D8%25AF%25D9%2586-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AF%25D9%2581%25D8%25B9-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25AE%25D8%25B7%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25B3%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2585-%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D9%2586%25D9%2587%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A1-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2581%25D9%258A-%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7)) placed on the regime by the Arab fold, including repatriation, an end to Captagon production and smuggling, and cooperation in controlling militias and instituting reforms.

In the meantime, however, continued support of Washington and other allies will be crucial in amplifying the voice of Syrians both in and out of the country, ensuring that the valid concerns and demands of the people do not get lost in the noise. ❖

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