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From the “Grey Zone” to the End Zone: GCC State Influence and Prospects for Syria’s Reintegration into the Arab World



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Introduction

Syria has spent more than a decade under U.S.-led sanctions and yet there is a growing realization that the United States and Arab Gulf states’ policies aimed at removing President Bashar al-Assad from power have been ineffective. This outcome has been impacted by two major shifts: the first being Iranian military support accepted by President al-Assad in 2011 and the second being Russian military intervention in 2015. In contrast to significant support given to armed Syrian



opposition groups, some states such as Oman have been championing a dialogue with President al-Assad aimed at conflict resolution and regional stability. Other states, such as the UAE, have more recently come to a similar conclusion that diplomacy with al-Assad will open the way for greater stability, reconstruction, and economic opportunity. The 2023 earthquake which affected southern Turkey and northern Syria has again drawn international attention to the need for access to aid and reconstruction and could yet facilitate a strategic opening for the al-Assad regime.

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This paper studies the chances of such a strategic opening being carried through to the point of Syria’s reintegration into the Arab world.

The paper begins with a brief history of the al-Assad regime in Syria, its regional orientation, and its impact. This is followed by sections summarising Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state and the United States’ policy towards Syria. Finally, the structural and normative implications of Syria’s readmission into the Arab world are discussed in the conclusion.

A Brief History of al-Assad Rule

Domestic Politics

After the Ba’athists took power in Syria in 1963, Hafez al-Assad became commander of the air force. Then in 1966, after participating in a coup led by General Salah al-Jadid which overthrew the Syrian civilian leadership, he became minister of defense. Al-Assad engaged in a power struggle with Salah al-Jadid, the de-facto leader of Syria from 1966 to 1970 seizing control in November 1970. Hafez al-Assad consolidated his power as president in 1971, turning the state over to mass surveillance and Soviet-style dictatorship. He led the family’s control over the security services and other important nodes of political and economic influence, including through intermarriage. The Alawis, who have lived in the coastal mountains for generations, generally saw their fortunes sustained in line with their integration with networks of Syrian power (such as the civil service, army and intelligence service) under Hafez al-Assad rule. At the core of the Syrian regime is survival and sectarian arrangements, rooted in French colonial decision-making.



Arab nationalism and Arab socialism also played important roles as the official state doctrine of the ruling Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. Arab nationalism quickly ran into opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood who viewed the secular party as un-Islamic and challenged the legitimacy of Al-Assad rule. In 1979, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members killed over eighty unarmed Alawi cadets at a military training compound in Aleppo, and in 1980 the Assad regime issued Law Number 49 that declared membership in or association with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood a capital crime.¹ The group's campaign against the government from 1976 escalated into an uprising in 1982, concentrated in the conservative stronghold city of Hama. The Syrian Arab Army and Defence Companies (paramilitary force) besieged the town of Hama and massacred what is widely believed to have been tens of thousands of civilians in "one of the deadliest acts by any Arab government against its own people in the modern Middle East."² Syrian

Muslim Brotherhood members fled the country and contributed to the formation of The National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria in 1982 and the National Front for the Salvation of Syria in 1990. Law 49 became the pivot point for Syrian Muslim Brotherhood engagement with the Assad regime. In 1996 through secret negotiations, some sanctions were removed, such as some prisoner release and allowing some members to return from exile. The 2005 Damascus Declaration which called for peace transformation to democracy in concert with the regime also helped in this endeavour. However, amid rising tensions during the 2011 uprising due to Assad blaming the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood for the protests and the regime's refusal to overturn Law 49, the group shifted from turning to Turkey for support to throwing at least some of its weight behind the opposition.

Regional Politics

Syria lost the Golan Heights to Israel during the Six-Day War in June 1967, helping to shape what would be al-Assad's worldview from then on. In 1976, al-Assad moved to support Maronite

1 Harvard Divinity School, 'Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, The', <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/syrian-muslim-brotherhood>
 2 Robin Wright, "Syria: The Outlaws," *Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East*, (New York, Penguin Press, 2008), pp. 243-244.

Christian militias against the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and leftist militias in Lebanon. The Maronite militia, supported by Syria, laid siege to Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp in East Beirut in January 1976. By August, a full military assault resulted in the massacre of 1,000-1,500 Palestinians (civilians and some armed militia).³ The Syrian occupation of Lebanon lasted until the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri triggered the Cedar Revolution and the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005.

Iran and Syria became allies following the Islamic Revolution in Tehran in 1979 and despite ideological incongruity, relations have been durable.⁴ Over the following two decades, Iran facilitated bilateral relations and incorporated Hezbollah into what would become known as the 'Axis of Resistance', based on a strategy that is anti-status quo, opposed to Israel and U.S. hegemony. The eventuality of Hafez's younger son, Bashar al-Assad, coming to power was in no way guaranteed. Hafez's brother, Rifaat al-Assad attempted coup in late 1983⁵, and Bassel al-Assad, the eldest son, was expected to take over but died in a car crash in 1994.⁶ Hopes were high when Bashar al-Assad came to power on July 17, 2000, that due to his western education and emphasis on modernisation in his inaugural speech, liberalisation might occur.⁷ A decade later, even as Syria descended into chaos and conflict, al-Assad was still promising reform and an end to 48 years of emergency law.⁸ It was a ploy that has

been replicated by many states across the region, accompanied by other 'authoritarian upgrading' measures such as: appropriating civil society, managing political contestation, capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms, controlling new communications technologies, and diversifying international linkages.⁹ Sectarian divisions, deeply engrained by the Al-Assads, have been exacerbated by the number of rebels coming from abroad, the large Sunni population and minority group fears.

GCC State Policy Towards Syria (2011 - 2023)

The Syrian civil war began with al-Assad's troops firing on protestors in the southern Syrian town of Deraa in March 2011 and continued between (pro-democratic) insurgents and President Bashar al-Assad's government. The conflict quickly attracted foreign support from a number of regional actors, including Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the side of opposition forces, and Iran, which mobilized in support of the al-Assad regime.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia had been in favour of a U.S. boycott against Bashar al-Assad for his alleged involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 (its policy was informed partly by the personal friendship that existed between Saudi's King Abdullah and Rafic Hariri).¹¹ For a long time, Syrian Arab nationalism clashed with the conservative orientation of the Saudi monarchy, and this was made more threatening through the 'Axis of Resistance' with Iran. However, regional politics had been far more complex, and both states had similar interests, including vis-à-vis Israel and Iraq from 1973 to 1990. For example, Syria

3 Elias Khoury, "Rethinking the *Nakba*," *Critical Inquiry*, 38 (2), Winter 2012, pp. 250-266; The Centre for Social Sciences Research and Action, "Conflict Incident Report: Fall of Tal el-Zaatar and Jisr el-Basha," <https://civilsociety-centre.org/sir/fall-tal-el-zaatar-and-jisr-el-basha#:~:text=When%20Tel%20al%20DZaatar%20fell,elements%20and%20civilians%20is%20unclear>.

4 Eskander Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Salvaging the 'Axis of Resistance,'" *Preserving Strategic Depth: The Iranian Political Elite and Syria: Parallel Tracks with a Single Objective*, *Dirasat*, 1, November 2014, p. 9, <https://www.kfcris.com/pdf/7d62a3b757a515fda375b740e230d2dc-57cc7012a8db1.pdf>

5 Patrick Seale, "The Brothers' War", *Asad*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 427

6 AP, "Eldest Son of Syria's President Assad is Killed in Car Crash," *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 1994, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-01-22-mn-14312-story.html>

7 Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: From 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?," *International Affairs*, 88 (1), January 2012, pp. 95-113.

8 Katherine Marsh, "Syria Protests Continue as Bashar al-Assad Promises

Reform," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/16/bashar-al-assad-syria>

9 Steven Heydemann, "Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World," Analysis Paper 13, Brookings Institution, October 2007, p. 5, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/10arabworld.pdf>

10 Robert Mason, "Strategic Depth through Enclaves: Iran, Syria and Hezbollah," *Middle East Policy*, 28 (2), Summer 2021, pp. 96-108.

11 In 2020 a UN tribunal convicted a single member of the Hezbollah group for the assassination. Toby Sterling and Bart H. Meijer, "U.N. Tribunal Convicts Hezbollah Defendant in Hariri Assassination Case," *Reuters*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-lebanon-tribunal-hariri-idUKKCN25E001>



expelled members of the pro-Saddam Hussein Muslim Brotherhood during the Gulf War. Typical of Saudi King Abdullah's diplomacy of the time, he sought to bring al-Assad into the Arab fold in 2009 and 2010. He hosted al-Assad in 2006, 2007 (Arab summit), and twice in 2010, and visited Damascus in 2009 for a Saudi – Syrian summit.¹² Qatar too had been close to the al-Assad regime, having worked alongside Turkey to break the U.S.-led diplomatic boycott of Bashar al-Assad in 2005. Qatar also helped end an 18-month political crisis by sponsoring the Doha Agreement reached by rival Lebanese factions in 2008 and ended with Michel Suleiman, Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, being appointed as a consensus president. Doha still has communication channels with Hezbollah that are effective in Lebanon.¹³

Whilst the Syrian uprisings were initially met with a subdued response by Saudi Arabia due to its concerns about events taking place in Bahrain and Egypt, Qatar state-owned media network *Al Jazeera* moved quickly in support of protestor demands across the region. Riyadh's immediate response was to pursue economic largesse internally and towards close and strategic allies experiencing duress, such as Oman, Bahrain, and Jordan. Qatar's approach to the Arab uprisings was conditioned more by distractions with Libya at first, and the internal political machinations taking place under a new Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. Given Qatar's relative lack of domestic constraint, Syria represented more of an opportunity for Qatar to extend its influence abroad, including through the rotating presidency of the Arab League, which it held from 2011-2012. The wave of protests in the Middle East caused a significant, albeit temporary, shift in Qatari foreign policy from mediation to a much more active role with an emphasis on the Syrian conflict.¹⁴

By 2012 U.S. officials were already complaining that hard-line Syrian Islamist groups were receiving the lion's share of arms shipped to the Syrian opposition, through routes originating mostly from Qatar and to a lesser degree Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ By 2013, Qatar had spent \$3 billion on the Syrian revolution in just two years, vastly outspending western states.¹⁶ Having lost Muslim Brotherhood-led government ties in Egypt, perhaps it saw more reason to go 'all in' with billions more in Syria as a means to broaden its influence, in parallel with pursuing cooperative relations with neighbouring Iran. For Saudi Arabia, the conflict was a vital new front in a Cold War with Iran in which both states were competing in a zero-sum game for power and influence.¹⁷ In 2014, the U.S. Treasury noted that Qatar and Kuwait were operating permissive jurisdictions for soliciting donations to fund extremist insurgents, including Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the Al Nusra Front, and the Islamic State.¹⁸ The Kuwaiti deputy foreign minister expressed surprise at this and pointed out the three donor conferences it hosted and its participation in other conferences to support the Syrian people.¹⁹ Kuwait, which had perhaps the closest GCC state relationship with al-Assad from 1990 to 2011, partly a function of Syrian policy that restrained terror groups that could have used the Gulf War as a pretext to target U.S. and other western states in Iraq,²⁰ restored diplomatic ties at

12 Jim Muir, "High Hopes for Saudi – Syrian Summit," *BBC News*, October 8, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8296052.stm>
 13 Souhayb Jawhar, "Doha: Filling the Arab Void in Lebanon", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 31, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88922>
 14 Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

15 David E. Sanger, "Rebel Arms Flow is said to Benefit Jihadists in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/15/world/middleeast/jihadists-receiving-most-arms-sent-to-syrian-rebels.html>
 16 Roula Khalaf and Abigail Fielding Smith, "Qatar Bankrolls Syrian Revolt with Cash and Arms," *Financial Times*, May 16, 2013, <http://ig-legacy.ft.com/content/86e3f28e-be3a-11e2-bb35-00144feab7de#axz-z7uovmwfafR>
 17 F. Gregory Gause III, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," Brookings, July 22, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/>
 18 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen Before the Center for a New American Security on "Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing," March 4, 2014, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl2308>
 19 Sputnik Arabic, "Kuwait's Foreign Ministry Hints at a "Development" in Gulf Relations with Syria Soon," December 31, 2018, <https://sputnikarabic.ae/20181231/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AC-1037923900.html>
 20 Ray Mosely and Chicago Tribune, "Syria's Support of U.S. in Gulf

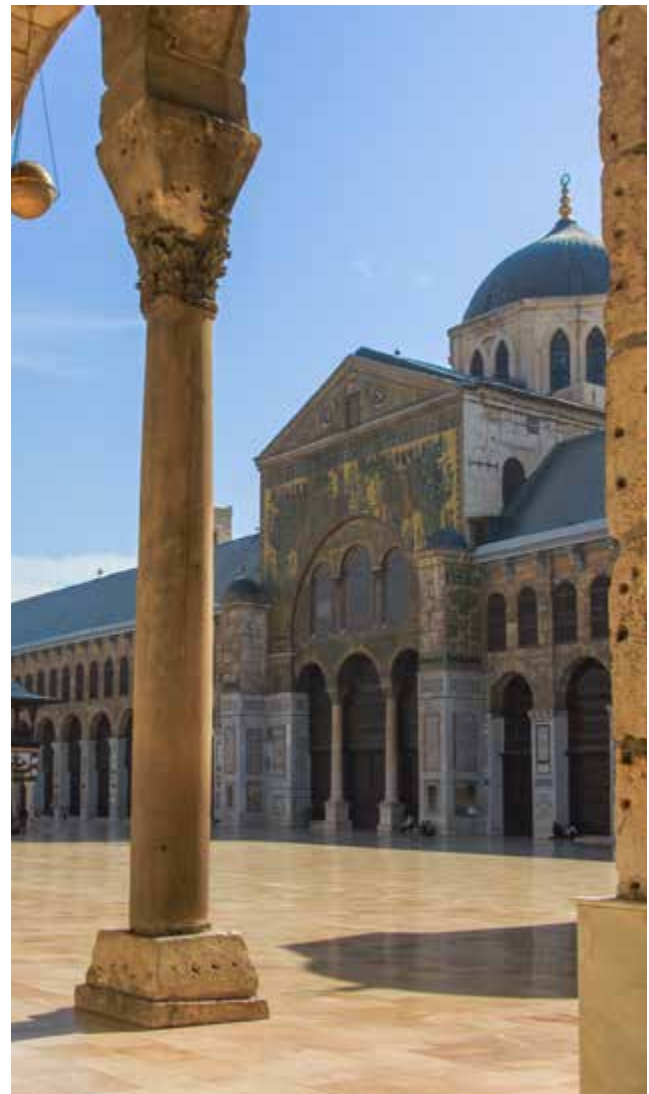
the chargés d'affaires level in 2014. The Kuwaiti government also opened consular services for 140,000 Syrians.²¹ A year later, Qatar was alleged to have been supporting Syrian rebels who returned to Syria 'with suitcases of money.'²²

For the Saudis, the conflict soon turned sectarian, with domestic pressure necessitating the perception of King Abdullah to shift from failing to protect the Sunni community in Iraq to protecting Syria's Sunni population. Riyadh also had to move quickly to ensure that returning jihadi fighters did not then challenge the House of Saud as they had done after jihad in Afghanistan and in other parts of Central Asia. Saudi policy was therefore in the awkward position of attempting to manage Sunni groups to defeat al-Assad, while guarding against the potential for terrorism blowback. After the lack of response from the Obama administration against the al-Assad after its use of chemical weapons in 2013, the then Secretary General of the National Security Council, Prince Bandar Al-Saud re-evaluated the Saudi position on Syria and moved to support more effective groups such as Jaysh al-Islam as a counterweight to Qatar's support for more extremist groups.²³ Thus the fracturing of the field of the Syrian opposition was facilitated by competing interests and helped pave the way for the GCC crisis from 2017 to 2021.

As the war dragged on without an adequate U.S. response, Mohammed bin Salman as Saudi Arabia's defence minister, then appeared to float the idea of putting boots on the ground in Syria in 2016 in a possible attempt to persuade the U.S. to make more commitments to the Syrian theatre. Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri, spokesman for

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War Paying Dividends,” March 12, 1991, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1991-03-12-9101220963-story.html>

21 Congressional Research Service, “Kuwait: Governance, Security, and US Policy,” July 9, 2018, p. 16, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RS/RS21513/111>

22 Jay Solomon and Nour Malas, “Qatar’s Ties to Militants Strain Alliance,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/qatars-ties-to-militants-strain-alliance-1424748601>

23 Ian Black, “Syria Crisis: Saudi Arabia to Spend Millions to Train New Rebel Force,” *The Guardian*, November 7, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/07/syria-crisis-saudi-arabia-spend-millions-new-rebel-force>



the Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen said “The kingdom is ready to participate in any ground operations that the coalition [against “Islamic State”] may agree to carry out in Syria.”²⁴ However, by this time Russia had already engaged and decisively tipped the balance of the conflict in al-Assad’s favour. GCC state policy on Syria has included a combination of so-called “grey zone” activities, which at various times have included: counterterrorism cooperation with the West, financing a diverse range of Syrian militia, containing suspect fundraising, and finding ways to prevent nationals from participating in jihadist activities aimed at regime change in Syria. Saudi Arabia has been focused on moving Syria out of the Iranian ‘Axis of Resistance’ and the ‘Shia Crescent,’ and deflating Iranian attempts to build up its military presence in Syria as part of its strategic depth.

The Syrian conflict has also become a testing ground for small-state strategies such as economic statecraft and diplomatic engagement with the aim of bringing stability to the region. Oman for example, has never cut diplomatic ties with Syria, believing that its diplomacy-first approach would pay dividends in promoting peace, humanitarian solutions, and reconstruction. Other Gulf States such as the United Arab Emirates have come to support this view and re-established diplomatic ties with the al-Assad regime in 2018. The UAE hosted President Assad for his first state visit in March 2022 and returned again on March 20, 2023, when his plane receiving a fighter jet escort and was met on the airport tarmac by Mohammed bin Zayed.²⁵ Beyond stemming the tide of Iranian influence, the move may also be linked to Assad’s malign activities such as exporting vast amounts of the drug Captagon which has netted him around \$6 billion, turning Syria effectively into a narco

state.²⁶ There have been regular interceptions of Captagon pills in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other parts of the Middle East from late 2022, representing revenues of tens or hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue.²⁷ Assad still does not have influence over the entire country, so this strategy of engagement is more about clear-eyed *real politik* and possible amelioration of a growing transnational crime rather than Syrian reintegration into the Arab fold as the country it used to be.

UAE involvement may have also reflected the *carte blanche* and transactional policies in the U.S. under the Trump administration at the time, especially in looking to hydrocarbon-rich states such as the UAE to spearhead reconstruction. The Saudi and UAE position in rolling back the regional influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, as part of an Islamist threat that is perceived to directly undermine monarchical rule, cannot be discounted. Maintaining the status quo will continue to freeze out the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood along with other elements that could have formed elements of a transitional government had the Assad regime been toppled. The UAE’s experience in Libya may be instructive in this regard, having supported Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar who was unable to prevail in an offensive against Tripoli through which Abu Dhabi sustained reputation damage via its association with Wagner Group during the operation. For a mercantilist small state exposed to so many sources of regional insecurity, a “zero problems” foreign policy based on dialogue looks to be far more pragmatic in all theatres of conflict, including Syria. The Bahraini Foreign Minister said that it had never broken off diplomatic relations with Syria “despite difficult

24 DW, ‘Saudi Arabia Offers Troops to Fight in Syria’, February 4, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-offers-up-ground-troops-for-syrian-civil-war-if-us-will-support-them/a-19028019>

25 Reuters, ‘Syria’s Assad Arrives in United Arab Emirates in Official Visit’, March 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-assad-arrives-uae-official-visit-state-media-2023-03-19/>

26 Martin Chulov, ‘Bashar al-Assad Seizes His Chance for a Comeback After Syrian Earthquake’, *The Guardian*, March 12, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/12/bashar-al-assad-seizes-his-chance-for-a-comeback-after-syrian-earthquake>

27 See for example: Amani Hamad, ‘Saudi Arabia Foils Captagon Smuggling Attempts, Seizes Over 2.9mln Pills’, *Alarabiya News*, December 30, 2022, [https://www.arabnews.com/node/2259766/middle-east](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2022/12/30/Saudi-Arabia-foils-captagon-smuggling-attempts-seizes-over-2-9-mln-pills#:~:text=Saudi%20Arabia%20foils%20captagon%20smuggling%20attempts%2C%20seizes%20over%202.9%20mln%20pills,-Saudi%20Arabia&text=Saudi%20security%20forces%20thwarted%20two,(SPA)%20reported%20on%20Friday; Arab News, ‘Police Thwart Attempt to Smuggle 4.5m Captagon Pills into UAE’, February 28, 2023, <a href=)

circumstances” of operating within a wartime environment.²⁸ However, the “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act” of 2019, or simply the Caesar Act, has severely constrained GCC state ambitions to lead on economic re-engagement with the al-Assad regime until such sanctions are watered down or removed. Instead, the UAE continues to operate and extend its “grey zone” activities in Syria, utilising Caesar Act exemptions to open field hospitals in Aleppo and Damascus and engaging in vaccine diplomacy with the al-Assad regime.²⁹ Other UAE projects, such as a 300-megawatt solar power project in the Widyan al-Rabie area of Damascus, remain on the table.

The UAE, Bahrain, and Oman all favour bringing Syria back into the Arab League. This would have a turnkey effect of normalizing Syria’s relations with a number of other states who prize consensus and multilateral solutions, including Kuwait. After the earthquake of early 2023, Syria’s reconstruction has moved up the agenda of these and other regional states. Both the UAE and Jordanian foreign ministers made short visits to Turkey and Syria in February 2023 aimed at showing solidarity with both countries and in the pursuit of conducting relief diplomacy. Syrian refugees have been a feature of Jordanian demography for over 70 years and so with GCC state support and U.S. acquiescence, it is easy to see the attraction of re-engaging with al-Assad. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has numbered Syrian refugees in Jordan at around 638,000, while the Jordanian government puts the total at 1.3 million.³⁰ Since 2011, the burden on Jordan has increased as 2.5 million Syrian refugees have entered and either

settled there, returned to Syria, or transited to Europe or North America.³¹ Although Jordan may push for cordial relations with its northern neighbour, it is doing so with specific security and demographic challenges, as well as potential economic gains, in mind.³²

After his visit to Syria, the Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed met with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington D.C. in part to discuss the humanitarian response to the earthquake.³³ Subsequently, on February 19, 2023, the U.S. announced \$100 million in Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) funds and humanitarian assistance to support the earthquake response, in addition to the \$85 million for Turkey and Syria announced on February 9, 2023, under license from the U.S. Treasury.³⁴ Egyptian Foreign Minister Samer Shoukry also visited Turkey and Syria, in an apparent softening of Egyptian policy towards these countries.³⁵ Egypt also ranks in the top five destinations for Syrian refugees, with estimates of 146,049 Syrians as of January 31, 2023.³⁶ Although the refugees do not have access to Egyptian state-funded services, state ambivalence may have turned to concern as the Egyptian economy continues to experience strong headwinds and pressure for structural reform. Saudi Arabia sent a plane of relief aid to Syria after the quake, carrying 35 tonnes of food aid³⁷, the first tacit engagement with the regime in more

28 Reuters, “Bahrain Says No Interruption to Diplomatic Ties with Syria,” December 28, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-bahrain-idUSKCN1OR0FI>

29 Andreas Krieg, “UAE Ready to Lead on Syria if the US Tires of Sanctions,” January 12, 2023, <https://www.andreaskrieg.com/post/uae-is-ready-to-lead-on-syria-if-the-us-tires-of-sanctions>

30 Kelsey P. Norman and Lisel Hintz, “The Real Refugee Crisis is in the Middle East, Not Europe,” Project on Middle East Political Science, <https://pomeps.org/the-real-refugee-crisis-is-in-the-middle-east-not-europe>

31 Ibid.

32 Armenak Tokmajyan, “Jordan Edges Towards Syria,” March 28, 2022, Carnegie Middle East Center, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2022/03/28/jordan-edges-toward-syria-pub-86746>

33 Al Monitor, “UAE’s Abdullah bin Zayed Visits US, Days After Meeting Assad,” February 13, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/02/uaes-abdullah-bin-zayed-visits-us-days-after-meeting-assad>

34 Carla E. Humud, “Syria and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, In Focus, February 24, 2023, p. 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11930>

35 Reuters/AP, “Egypt’s Top Diplomat in Damascus, Meets with Syria’s Assad,” February 27, 2023, available at <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2258701/middle-east>

36 UNHCR Egypt, ‘Refugee Context in Egypt’, <https://www.unhcr.org/about-us/refugee-context-in-egypt#:~:text=As%20of%2031%20January%202023,more%20than%2050%20other%20nationalities>.

37 France 24, ‘Saudi Plane Carrying Aid Lands in Syria, First in Decade’, February 14, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230214-saudi-plane-carrying-aid-lands-in-syria-first-in-decade>



than a decade.³⁸ Wider parliamentary delegations travelled from Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Libya, Egypt, the UAE, Oman, and Lebanon travelled to Syria. During their visit Iraqi parliament speaker Mohammed Halbousi said that “We cannot do without Syria and Syria cannot do without its Arab environment, which we hope it can return to.”³⁹ Iraq, which has suffered from two decades of conflict, instability, and Islamic State insurgency, is in desperate need of domestic and regional stability of its own, to recover and begin to substantially address infrastructure and other economic concerns. Baghdad is therefore enthusiastic to rebuild ties. Iraq also represents a cautionary tale about how the de-ba’athification process seriously compromised Iraqi national security and helped to unleash a civil war and persistent sectarian-based violence which still has repercussions for Iraq’s position in the region and reconstruction. Should the Alawites be removed from the army and other state institutions, a similar process of state collapse could occur. Tunisia, is a country from which a disproportionate number of jihadists travelled to fight in Syria as well as other theatres of conflict prior to 2011.⁴⁰ Now under President Kais Saied who, after a power grab, vows to restore relations with Syria, which will at least superficially, ease his international isolation from leaders, donors and investors.⁴¹ Qatar, one of the few Arab states still overtly against normalization, has been vocal in its criticism about delays in aid reaching earthquake victims in Syria, in an apparent reference to the Assad regime’s interference.⁴²

38 Nadeen Ebrahim, “Syria’s Assad Hopes Quake Can Help Free Him From Global Isolation,” *CNN*, February 15, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/15/middleeast/assad-pariah-status-earthquake-mime-intl/index.html>

39 Reuters, “Syria’s Assad Meets Senior Arab Lawmakers in Damascus,” February 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-assad-meets-senior-arab-lawmakers-damascus-2023-02-26/>

40 Aaron Y. Zelin and Rukmini Callmachi, “Tunisia’s Missionaries of Jihad”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisi-as-missionaries-jihad>

41 DW, ‘Tunisia’s Saied to Restore Diplomatic Relations with Syria’, March 11, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/tunisi-as-saied-to-restore-diplomatic-relations-with-syria/a-64953794>

42 Reuters, ‘Qatar’s Emir Criticises Delay in Aid to Earthquake Victims in Syria’, March 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/qatars-emir-criticises-delay-aid-earthquake-victims-syria-2023-03-05/>

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Recognizing past strategies have not worked, Saudi Arabia has switched track and appears to have gone ‘all in’ for diplomacy in 2023, first with an agreement with Iran facilitated by Iraq, Oman and finally China. The agreement includes normalization of relations, the implementation of a 2001 security agreement, and the non-intervention in the internal affairs of the other state. This was quickly followed by the kingdom opting to re-establish diplomatic ties with Syria in March 2023, with both states agreeing to reopen their embassies after Ramadan.⁴³ The kingdom looks to have participated in an economic package with other allied Arab states to help challenge Iranian influence in Syria including Iran – Hezbollah links. This could potentially affect Tehran’s foreign and security calculations on a host of issues including Yemen which is so vital to **the** Saudi national security interest. Other conditions for Syria’s re-entry into the Arab League are said to include Arab troops deployed to Syria to “protect returning refugees” and patrol the Syria – Iraq border (linked to constraining Iranian influence and clamping down on the

43 Reuters, ‘After Iran, Saudi Arabia to Re-establish Ties with Syria, Sources Say’, *Reuters*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/after-iran-saudi-arabia-re-establish-ties-with-syria-sources-say-2023-03-23/>

captagon trade), along with requests for the Assad regime to clamp down on the captagon trade itself.⁴⁴ A Syrian government adviser said Assad “has shown no interest in political reform or a willingness to welcome Arab troops.”⁴⁵ However, the kingdom will host an Arab summit in May 2023 and should President Assad visit Saudi Arabia before then, further negotiation could be possible.

Assad’s strategy looks to be focused on securing near-term gains. Through exploiting Russia’s presence in the country from 2015, it aims to rebalance its relations with Hezbollah which opened a front against Israel in the Golan Heights from 2012-2013 (and could further threaten Syrian sovereignty), and Iran, which continues to benefit from strategic depth in Syria.⁴⁶ Qatar is the frontrunner to influence events on the ground, and the UAE could gain sway through spearheading Assad’s reintegration into the Arab world. However, following the Saudi – Iranian deal brokered by China and a possible Saudi normalisation with Israel in exchange for assistance for its nuclear program, security assurances, and fewer restrictions on arms sales⁴⁷, the kingdom could be in a much more favourable position to influence the Assad regime in future.

US Policy towards Syria

Syria – U.S. relations have been scarred by CIA activities in Syria since the agency’s inception in 1947 and throughout the Cold War, including a failed coup attempt against President Shukri al-Quwatli in 1957. Relations were severed after the Six-Day War until 1974 and the U.S. has regarded

Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism since at least the 1980s. The U.S. and Syria consulted with each other alongside Saudi Arabia, in the lead-up to the signing of the Taif Accord in 1989 in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia, which ended the civil war in Lebanon, and in 1991 Hafez al-Assad accepted President H. W. Bush’s invitation to attend the U.S. – Soviet-led Middle East peace conference in Madrid. American shuttle diplomacy in 1994 proposed the Israeli withdrawal to restore pre-1967 borders (and therefore out of the Golan Heights) in return for a possible peace treaty.⁴⁸ Since then there has been limited cooperation in the Global War on Terror, but Syria’s opposition to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 soured relations. Syrian interference in Lebanon until 2005 loomed large, as did the 2006 U.S. embassy bombing attempt in Damascus, and U.S. support for Syrian civil society opposition groups. In 2009 then U.S. Senator John Kerry, stated at a press conference that the Obama administration considered Syria to be “an essential player in bringing peace and stability to the region.”⁴⁹ More recently, U.S. policy has largely centered on Syria’s human rights abuses and selective paramilitary operations.

U.S. policy continues to have the most significant bearing on GCC state policy towards Syria, both in the Obama administration’s decision not to push back against the al-Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons in 2013, relying instead on a deal with Russia to remove its stockpile and the U.S. Congress’ passing of the Caesar Act in 2019. The same year the U.S. military launched airstrikes against Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-backed Kataib Hezbollah on the Iraq-Syria border, including two strikes inside Syria, after the group launched an attack that killed a

44 The Cradle, ‘Arab Leaders Offer Syria Billions in Aid, Sanctions Relief if Assad Pushes Back Against Iran: WSJ’, March 16, 2023, <https://thecradle.co/article-view/22599/arab-leaders-offer-syria-billions-in-aid-sanctions-relief-if-assad-pushes-back-against-iran-wsj>

45 Ibid.

46 Mohanad Hage Ali, ‘Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship’, Carnegie Middle East Center, March 29, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/29/power-points-defining-syria-hezbollah-relationship-pub-78730>

47 Michael Crowley, Vivian Nereim and Patrick Kingsley, ‘Saudi Arabia Offers its Price to Normalize Relations with Israel’, *The New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/09/us/politics/saudi-arabia-israel-united-states.html>

48 Frederic C. Hof, “Mapping Peace Between Syria and Israel,” *USIP Special Report*, 2009, p. 6, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/mappingpeace.pdf>

49 Harriet Alexander, “John Kerry and Bashar al-Assad Dined in Damascus”, *The Telegraph*, 2 September 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10283045/John-Kerry-and-Bashar-al-Assad-dined-in-Damascus.html>



U.S. military contractor at a military base in northern Iraq.⁵⁰ U.S. President Joe Biden *could have* implemented a new strategy on Syria by immediately revoking former President Trump’s recognition of Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights. Instead, this issue is left to fester, creating significant challenges in any future Syria – Israel negotiations.

Since U.S. diplomatic channels with Russia on Syria have dried up following the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, U.S. policy has been focused on: sustaining the U.S. and coalition campaigns against the Islamic State; supporting local ceasefires; expanding humanitarian-aid access; and pressing for accountability and the respect for international law, including with regards to human rights and non-proliferation.⁵¹ The U.S. has more recently widened the aperture for assistance to the Syrian people⁵² and introduced new sanctions aimed at curbing Syria’s production and export of Captagon.⁵³ Progress remains tied to Russia, which continues to exert greater influence and achieve a greater geostrategic impact than the U.S. or the GCC states in government-held areas in Syria, especially through hard power deployed from its Khmeimim air base and its naval facility at Tartus. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the Kremlin’s abrogation of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) nuclear arms treaty from February 21, 2023, Washington now sees Syria as being inherently and even perhaps subordinate to advancing a range of U.S. interests viz-a-viz Russia, with nuclear non-proliferation a major concern.

Changes to regional attitudes on engagement with the al-Assad regime reflect the fact, and this is recognised by the Biden administration, that isolating Syria hasn’t worked and has only helped Iran expand influence in the region.⁵⁴ However, there doesn’t appear to be any new policy approach to address this failing. The U.S. government has not made any indication that it will soon depart from its longstanding policy of non-intervention in government held areas of Syria, whether it be in providing development assistance or reconstruction funding. . This has been outlined by U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul in a letter sent to Secretary of State Blinken in January 2023. In it he states that UN agencies receiving U.S. funding do not have the same definition of “early recovery” as the U.S. government does, and thereby risks an important source of U.S. leverage against President al-Assad.⁵⁵ The Biden administration is neither leading on Syria nor trying to effect change through regional allies. As one diplomat has noted, the Biden administration is not in the business of chasing sovereign governments, except to urge regional states to think long and hard about how to engage with the al-Assad regime and not to give normalisation away for free.⁵⁶ The Russo-Ukrainian war has highlighted that U.S. and GCC state interests are not always aligned and there continues to be a plurality of views on Syria within the Middle East. Whereas the Biden administration would prefer collective action, this appears to be a non-starter. Even in terms of influencing GCC state policy on Syria’s readmission to the Arab League, one diplomat noted that the U.S. does not have a seat in the Arab League and so could not veto Syria’s possible readmission.⁵⁷ Biden administration policy on Syria is set to be relatively passive, focused instead on managing stability in

50 Julian E. Barnes, ‘U.S. Launches Airstrikes on Iranian-Backed Forces in Iraq and Syria’, *The New York Times*, December 29, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/29/world/middleeast/us-airstrikes-iran-iraq-syria.html>

51 Carla E. Humud, “Syria and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, In Focus, February 24, 2023, p. 2.

52 Interview with a senior diplomat, March 2, 2023.

53 Elizabeth Hagedorn, ‘New US Sanctions Target Syria’s Captagon Trade Linked to Assad’, *Al-Monitor*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/03/new-us-sanctions-target-syrias-captagon-trade-linked-assad>

54 Interview with a senior diplomat, March 2, 2023.

55 US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, “Biden Admin Eroding Leverage Over Assad, McCaul Presses State to Reevaluate Early Recovery Aid,” January 25, 2023, <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/biden-admin-eroding-leverage-over-assad-mccaul-presses-state-to-reevaluate-early-recovery-aid/>

56 Ibid.

57 Interview with a senior diplomat, March 2, 2023.

states where it is more likely to achieve impact and consolidate foreign policy ‘wins’ in the final two years of the (first) administration. These include growing tensions in Israel – Palestine, avoiding state collapse in Lebanon (which continues to host a large Syrian refugee population), and in supporting economic stability in Egypt (including UAE mediation on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and other issues upstream in Sudan and the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia).⁵⁸ In all these cases, to achieve stability, the U.S. will need GCC state support and cooperation.

Conclusion

The process of Syrian reintegration into the Arab League comes late in the Syrian conflict that has claimed the lives of around half a million. Whilst it is yet to be determined, there is growing evidence to suggest that an ‘end zone’ is approaching whereby at least some Middle Eastern states will reconcile with the Assad regime. Syria is a different place compared to what it was pre-2010: The failure of the UK and the U.S. to take decisive military action in Syria in August 2013 has resulted in a protracted conflict and contested territory that is still dominated by a plethora of state, external, and non-state actors nearly a decade later. There is also evidence that the Assad regime has been actively working to rebuild its chemical weapons stockpile since at least 2018.⁵⁹ Unlike Saudi Arabia, which has sought re-engagement with Iraq from Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi onwards, and where de-sectarianisation and regional stability have been key concerns, Assad is highly unlikely to change his outlook after more than a decade of retrenchment. Iranian forward bases and air defences in Syria are bound to stay unless a new security deal or partition is negotiation. The question then is to what extent can GCC states

moderate the ‘Axis of Resistance’ and pre-empt a wider regional conflagration involving Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon?

Following further diplomacy with Turkey, Russia and Israel, it is conceivable that a plan for de-escalation and peace with Syria will bear fruit, although the Iranian threat perception would have to be taken into account (including nuclear negotiations, Israel’s shadow war and Turkey’s strong trade ties with Iraq). Rising U.S. tensions with Iran signal an inauspicious period up ahead, although China’s success in brokering a new normalisation deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran and acting as host for further talks might nevertheless achieve some progress. Depending on the provisions of any peace deal, it could encourage Syrians to return home and help address an additional inflationary pressure and/or strain on public services, as well as social stability in some cases, in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and Greece. At least partial reconstruction would be a prerequisite to this, a role ideally suited to the GCC states, especially given the additional human cost of Syria’s illicit exports. Leverage does exist in Syria’s readmission to the Arab League and economic packages which are necessary in driving reforms since the al-Assad regime has repeatedly reneged on promised reforms in the past. Saudi Arabia, alongside other GCC states such as Qatar

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Without changes to U.S. policy, the GCC states will be left in a stronger position, along with China, to dictate the terms of the beginning of Syria’s reconstruction.

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⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Statement by Ambassador Barbara Woodward at the Security Council meeting on Syria, ‘Assad has been Actively Rebuilding Chemical Weapons in Syria’, HM Government, February 7, 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/assad-has-been-actively-rebuilding-chemical-weapons-in-syria>



and Kuwait, could play an important role in the timing and sequencing of such a move, including by moderating the economic interests and engagement of allies such as Jordan and Egypt. Included in a near-term plan could be an enhanced programme developed with Turkey that extends basic services along the northern Syrian border.

The normative aspects of further recognition and the reintegration of Syria back into the Arab fold are of a different nature. First, without conditions, it would signal al-Assad's impunity from justice, including within multilateral institutions that are expected to uphold international norms. Second, without conditionality, the extended Syrian sectarian aberration would continue, reinforcing the ethnoreligious trends that often prevail in institutional arrangements and underpin tensions at various levels in the Middle East. Unconditional Syrian reintegration would reinforce Arab unity without the normative aspects that build common identity and purpose, leaving the process entirely

led by national interests- which are often short-term, competing and divergent. Third, Syrian normalisation and reintegration would signal another theatre in which U.S. power and influence appears to be waning. Coming so soon after disastrous U.S.-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan that ultimately yielded very little, America's failed policy towards Syria undermines its normative commitment to international law, despite its significant hard power resource commitments to the region at large. Consequently, it could embolden adversaries. Without changes to U.S. policy, the GCC states will be left in a stronger position, along with China, to dictate the terms of the beginning of Syria's reconstruction (with an estimated cost of \$1.2 trillion in total), enhancing their overall influence in the Levant, as well as their autonomy across the region and beyond.



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