

اجتماعات الرياض بشأن سوريا Riyadh Meetings On Syria

12th January ٢٠٢٥ ١٤٤٦ رجب



Photo Source:



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Saudi Arabia's Role in Syria's Recovery and Arab Nations' Renewed Engagement with Damascus

Hannan Alghamdi
January 2025



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter





Saudi Arabia's Role in Syria's Recovery and Arab Nations' Renewed Engagement with Damascus

On December 8, 2024, the Assad regime [collapsed](#) following a swift offensive by opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The rebels captured key cities, including Aleppo, Hama, and Homs, before seizing the capital, Damascus. Facing imminent defeat, President Bashar al-Assad fled to Moscow, where he was granted asylum, ending over five decades of Assad family rule in Syria.

This unexpected turn of events was welcomed by many in the region. In response, Arab nations swiftly engaged with the new administration in Damascus, launching meetings and initiatives to address Syria's stability and recovery. The Riyadh Meeting on Syria, held on January 12, 2025, demonstrated broad Arab and international commitment to Syria's future. Organized under the leadership of Saudi Foreign Minister His Highness Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the meeting brought together representatives from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN). Foreign ministers and delegates from over 20 nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Turkey, and Egypt, joined forces to chart a path toward rebuilding Syria and restoring its role as a secure, sovereign state in the region. Analysts have noted that Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, have drawn lessons from the post-2003 instability in Iraq and are determined to prevent Syria from becoming a battleground for competing regional powers. Analyzing the engagement of Arab nations with the new administration in Damascus is essential to understanding how these dynamics influence their interrelationships and broader regional stability.

Saudi Arabia

Syria's geopolitical significance, at the heart of the regional balance of power, has driven Saudi Arabia to act decisively. Its efforts are motivated by two primary objectives: preventing further security deterioration with regional implications and filling the power vacuum to prevent undue influence by external actors. The Kingdom's proactive approach highlights the importance and relevance of Arab leadership in shaping Syria's future and ensuring long-term regional stability. The policy can also be seen as pragmatic, balancing regional security interests with political realities. After years of opposition to Bashar al-Assad's regime during the civil war, Saudi Arabia took immediate steps to engage with Damascus, including hosting Syria's new foreign minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, in early January. This signals a broader strategy to revitalize relations and re-establish Arab influence in Syria's reconstruction and future political trajectory. However, Riyadh's support comes with expectations, including a commitment by the future Syria leadership to foster internal unity.

Meetings between the respective leadership have continued. The meeting in Damascus on January 24, 2025, between Syrian leader Ahmad al-Sharaa and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan focused on bolstering Syria's security, stability, and economic recovery, including lifting sanctions and rebuilding national institutions. Both parties emphasized the importance of cooperation to fulfill the aspirations of the Syrian people and promote regional stability. Ahmad al-Sharaa's visit to Saudi Arabia on February 2, 2025, then marked a particularly important moment, as Riyadh became the first foreign capital he visited since assuming leadership. The visit not only emphasized Saudi Arabia's central role in shaping Syria's post-conflict trajectory but also



reinforced the Kingdom's commitment to regional stability. During his meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, discussions centered on strengthening diplomatic ties, economic cooperation, and advancing Syria's reintegration into the Arab fold. Both sides reaffirmed their dedication to fostering unity in Syria and ensuring that reconstruction efforts align with broader regional security interests. The visit solidified Syria's growing re-engagement with Arab nations and highlighted Saudi Arabia's determination to steer diplomatic initiatives for long-term peace and stability.

United Arab Emirates

The UAE has also taken a proactive and strategic approach in engaging with Syria's new administration, reflecting its broader geopolitical ambitions in the Levant. Abu Dhabi has long sought to counter Islamist ideologies, promote regional stability, and expand its influence through economic diplomacy. With Syria emerging from years of conflict and political isolation, the UAE sees an opportunity to deepen its ties with Damascus while ensuring that the new leadership prioritizes moderation and inclusivity. Since the transition in Syria's leadership, the UAE has intensified its diplomatic efforts, signaling its willingness to work closely with the new administration. High-level Emirati officials have already held discussions with their Syrian counterparts, focusing on security cooperation, economic investment, and Syria's reintegration into the Arab League. Abu Dhabi's emphasis is on fostering a pragmatic, secular-oriented governance structure that curtails the influence of political Islam, an objective that aligns with its regional policies. The UAE's leadership has made it clear that its support hinges on Syria's commitment to distancing itself from Islamist factions and external influences that could destabilize the region. Beyond diplomacy, the UAE is positioning itself as a key partner in Syria's reconstruction. With its vast financial resources and expertise in infrastructure development, Abu Dhabi is expected to play a considerable role in rebuilding Syria's war-torn cities, revitalizing key economic sectors, and facilitating trade partnerships. Emirati companies are reportedly exploring investment opportunities in real estate, energy, and logistics, leveraging Syria's strategic location as a gateway between the Levant and the Gulf.

Qatar

Qatar's position is more complex. Historically, Qatar supported opposition forces in Syria during the civil war, aligning with Turkey in backing Islamist factions. Qatar has emerged as one of the most engaged Arab states with Syria's new administration. Historically aligned with Turkey during the Syrian civil war, Qatar has now adopted a pragmatic strategy to secure its influence in Syria's reconstruction and reintegration into the Arab world. In December 2024, Qatar's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mohamed Al-Khulaifi, [visited](#) Damascus. In January 2025, Qatar hosted a Syrian delegation led by Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani, further strengthening diplomatic relations. These diplomatic exchanges signal that Qatar is not merely re-engaging ties with the Syrian state but actively working to shape Syria's regional reintegration while maintaining leverage over key political actors within the new administration.

Economically, Qatar is helping finance Syria's public sector wage increases and supporting energy infrastructure, aligning with U.S. sanctions exemptions to aid Syria's recovery. By doing so, Qatar positions itself as Washington's most credible Arab partner in engaging with Syria's leadership, similar to its role in mediating with Hamas in the Israel-Palestine conflict. This approach allows Qatar to navigate U.S. interests while maintaining its regional influence. Politically, Qatar has



advocated for Syria's reintegration into the Arab League and called for lifting U.S. sanctions, positioning itself as a bridge between Syria and the international community. However, Qatar's engagement is also shaped by its broader strategy of balancing its historical alignment with opposition factions, its close ties to Turkey, and its growing cooperation with Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Jordan

Jordan has pragmatic reasons for engaging with Syria. With a shared border and significant trade and security interests, Amman has been working to stabilize its relationship with Damascus. Jordan's primary concern is preventing instability in southern Syria from spilling over its borders and affecting its own security and economy. In December 2024, Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi became the first Arab foreign minister to visit Syria following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. He [met](#) with the new de facto leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, to discuss bilateral relations and regional stability. Subsequently, in January 2025, Jordan and Syria [agreed](#) to form a joint security committee to secure their border, combat arms and drug smuggling, and prevent the resurgence of Islamic State militants. This initiative underscores Jordan's commitment to addressing mutual security concerns and enhancing cooperation with Syria's new administration. Beyond its bilateral engagement with Syria, Jordan is also coordinating closely with regional allies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, to ensure stability and curb threats posed by extremist groups and illicit networks operating in the region. Amman and Riyadh have been working together to strengthen border security measures and intelligence sharing regarding arms and drug smuggling from Syria. Additionally, Jordan has been involved in diplomatic efforts with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to push for a unified Arab approach to Syria's reconstruction and reintegration into the regional fold. Jordan and Saudi Arabia have also collaborated on refugee management policies, seeking sustainable solutions for the millions of displaced Syrians in neighboring countries.

Kuwait

Kuwait has adopted a cautious yet constructive approach in engaging with Syria's new administration. While not as proactive as Saudi Arabia or the UAE, Kuwait has supported humanitarian efforts and signaled its willingness to engage diplomatically. This approach aligns with its longstanding policy of neutrality, focusing on providing aid rather than becoming entangled in regional conflicts. Kuwait emphasizes the need for an inclusive political transition and stability in Syria and is unlikely to take a leading role in normalizing relations without broader Arab consensus. In late December 2024, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Abdullah Ali Al-Yahya, accompanied by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary-General Jasem Mohamed AlBudaiwi, visited Damascus. They met with Syria's de facto leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, and Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan al-Shaibani, discussing regional developments and potential cooperation. During this visit, al-Shaibani urged Kuwait to reopen its embassy in Damascus and resume diplomatic relations. Al-Yahya [responded](#) by calling on the international community to reconsider sanctions imposed on Syria and emphasized Kuwait's keenness to open a new page of regional cooperation.

Iraq

Iraq's relationship with Syria is shaped by shared security and geopolitical interests. Baghdad has maintained consistent contact with Damascus, focusing on counterterrorism and border control. Iraq is less concerned with the Islamist leanings of Syria's new administration and more focused



on ensuring stability in its western neighborhood to prevent the resurgence of ISIS and other extremist groups.

Iraq supports Syria's reintegration into the Arab League and views its stabilization as essential for regional security. Its engagement with Damascus is practical and cooperative, aimed at addressing shared challenges rather than ideological alignment. The current Iraqi leadership, under Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, [emphasizes](#) the importance of Syria's security for the broader region. In a recent communication, al-Sudani conveyed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that *"Syria's security is key to the stability of the whole region."* Regarding the Sunni-Shia dynamics and Iran's influence in Syria, Iraq's stance is nuanced. While Iraq has a Shia-majority government with historical ties to Iran, it has shown caution in deepening involvement in Syria's internal conflicts. Notably in December 2024, Iraqi Shia factions [decided](#) against sending fighters to support Assad's regime, even as Sunni Islamist rebels advanced. This reflects a desire to avoid further sectarian escalation and to focus on domestic stability. The Iraqi government has engaged diplomatically with Syria's new administration. An Iraqi delegation, led by intelligence chief Hamid al-Shatri, met with Syrian officials to discuss border security and regional developments. Government spokesman Bassem al-Awadi highlighted that the discussions focused on *"the developments in the Syrian arena, and security and stability needs on the two countries' shared border."*

Egypt

Egypt has taken a cautious but deliberate approach to engaging with Syria's new administration. While it has yet to fully embrace the new government, Cairo has maintained limited diplomatic contact. In early January, Egyptian officials [hosted](#) Syria's new Foreign Minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, emphasizing the importance of a *"comprehensive political transition led by Syrians without external influence, safeguarding Syria's unity, stability, and Arab identity."* Cairo's cautious approach reflects dual concerns: first, a fear that Syria's Islamist-backed leadership could embolden movements like Egypt's banned Muslim Brotherhood, and second, a desire to maintain relevance in Syria's future trajectory. Egypt does not want to be sidelined by Gulf states like Saudi Arabia or the UAE, which have taken a more proactive stance. While Egypt's engagement remains limited, it is likely to deepen over time as part of a broader Arab effort to stabilize Syria and prevent external actors from dominating the country.

Lebanon

Lebanon shares deep historical, political, and economic ties with Syria, making its engagement with Damascus a necessity rather than a choice. Lebanon's fragile political and economic situation has been exacerbated by the Syrian conflict, particularly due to the influx of refugees and cross-border security issues. Lebanon has been engaging with Syria's new administration primarily to address practical concerns, such as refugee returns and trade. While Beirut has refrained from taking a strong stance on the ideological nature of Syria's leadership, it recognizes the importance of maintaining close ties with Damascus for its own stability. Lebanon's position aligns with broader Arab efforts to reintegrate Syria into the regional fold while ensuring its own interests are protected. Reaffirming this approach, Lebanon's newly elected President, Joseph Aoun, emphasized the need for a structured and constructive dialogue with Syria. In a statement on Thursday, January 9, 2025, Aoun [highlighted](#) the opportunity to redefine relations with Damascus, stating, *"We have the opportunity to begin a serious dialogue with the Syrian state and establish*



healthy relations between our nations.” He highlighted key priorities, including mutual respect for sovereignty and independence, securing borders in both directions, non-interference in internal affairs, and addressing the sensitive issue of missing persons.

GCC and Arab Contributions to Syria’s Recovery

The GCC’s commitment to supporting Syria emerged as a cornerstone of the Riyadh meeting. The Secretary-General of the GCC, Jasem Mohamed AlBudaiwi, outlined several initiatives aimed at facilitating Syria’s reconstruction and stability. These include organizing a donor conference, coordinating relief and development aid, and promoting political and security reforms within Syria. The GCC’s emphasis on countering terrorism, reducing militia influence, and consolidating state control over arms reflects a pragmatic approach to ensuring long-term peace. By aligning Arab efforts with those of international actors, the GCC has positioned itself as a relevant player in Syria’s recovery, bridging gaps between regional and global stakeholders. Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani also intends to participate in the meetings of the foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries scheduled to be held in Saudi Arabia in Mecca in February or March.

Broader Implications for the Middle East

The Riyadh meeting on January 12 and the broader engagement of the GCC and Arab states with Syria signal a strategic shift in regional diplomacy. Rather than being passive observers reacting to developments, Arab nations are taking a more assertive role in shaping Syria’s trajectory. This proactive approach showcases a commitment to stabilizing Syria as a functional state, limiting external interference, and reinforcing Arab leadership in regional affairs.

This renewed engagement is particularly significant given the competing influences of Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Each of these external actors has entrenched interests in Syria, potentially complicating Arab-led efforts to shape the country’s future. By presenting a unified front and emphasizing Arab-led reconstruction, Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, seek to counterbalance some of these influences. Furthermore, this diplomatic recalibration aligns with a broader vision of regional stability, emphasizing sovereignty, economic recovery, and conflict resolution through multilateral cooperation. The GCC’s efforts to lead Syria’s recovery also set a precedent for broader Arab engagement in post-conflict reconstruction, reinforcing the importance of regional solutions to regional crises.

While the Riyadh meeting has laid the foundation for Syria’s reintegration, significant challenges remain. Security and governance concerns persist due to Syria’s fractured political landscape, the presence of militias, and the absence of a strong centralized authority. Geopolitical rivalries further complicate Arab engagement, as Iran, Russia, and Turkey each pursue conflicting interests that could undermine collective efforts. Additionally, Syria’s reintegration into the Arab League faces resistance from Western blocs, whose sanctions and political hesitations create obstacles to full re-engagement. Economic constraints, particularly the high cost of reconstruction and the hesitancy of foreign investors due to U.S. and EU sanctions, further challenge Syria’s recovery. On the humanitarian front, refugee repatriation, post-war reconciliation, and the social reintegration of displaced populations require careful handling to avoid renewed tensions. Lastly, the risk of Islamist influence remains a key concern, with countries like the UAE and Egypt working to counter radicalization and prevent extremist groups from exploiting Syria’s fragile state.



Given these challenges, the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and other regional institutions must take a more unified and coordinated approach to ensure the success of Syria's reintegration and long-term stability. By fostering stronger multilateral cooperation and leveraging their collective diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian resources, these institutions can play a more decisive role in Syria's recovery.

**Hannan Alghamdi is a researcher at the Gulf Research Center (GRC)*

Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



**Gulf Research Center
Jeddah
(Main office)**

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Riyadh**

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Geneva**

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



**Gulf Research Centre
Cambridge**

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



**Gulf Research Center
Foundation Brussels**

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

www.grc.net

مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع