



Dimensions
for Strategic Studies

Situation Assessment



Blocked Horizons:

Arab normalization initiatives with the
Syrian regime

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Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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Preamble

In March 2022, Algeria will host the thirty-fourth session of the Arab Summit. Unparalleled since 2017, members, led by the [host country](#), seem more determined to have the Syrian regime attend the meeting after ten years of absence.

In fact, the presence of the regime at the Arab summit in Algeria means in theory the normalization of relations with it, but in practice, things do not seem so easy; because lifting its international isolation is not just a decision of the Arab countries, whether jointly or independently of the members, but it has also become linked to a number of determinants and policies.

However, the insistence of many Arab countries on restoring relations with the regime despite the political and security pressures and challenges it may entail, both domestically and internationally, seems interesting. Accordingly, the present report attempts to address the objectives of each individual State in terms of normalization, as well as the effects of this decision or position on international actors. It also focuses on the endeavors and fate of Arab normalization initiatives.

First: The objectives of normalization according to the policies of the actors



Lebanon:

On 13 February 2017, Lebanese President Michel Aoun called for Syria's seat in the Arab League not to be left vacant and given back to the regime.

Lebanon was thus the first Arab State to express its position on deisolating the regime.

This invitation appears to be the culmination of a meeting that took place between Michel Aoun and the delegate of the head of the Syrian regime, Minister of Presidential Affairs Mansour Azzam, in the capital Beirut on 7 November 2016, and it is the [first visit](#) of an official from the regime to Lebanon in 5 years, during which the congratulations of Bashar al-Assad were conveyed to Aoun on his assumption of the presidency, which remained vacant for two years.

Again, in January 2019, former Foreign Minister Gibran Basil, the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, called for the return of the Syrian regime to the Arab League, as this absence [constitutes the largest gap](#) in the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit hosted by Beirut at the time.

Originally, Lebanon did not vote on the decision of the Arab League on 12 November 2011 to suspend the Syrian regime's membership.

Speaker Nabih Berri rushed to say that the decision was [reversible](#) and that former President Michel Sleiman was seeking to do so by reviving the Arab League's dialogue with the Syrian regime.

Thus, it can be said that Lebanon's position on bringing back the Assad regime to the Arab League was nothing more than a response to Iran's policies and the nature of the relationship with the regime, as the organs of power in Lebanon are under the March 8 Forces coalition, which includes Hezbollah, the Free Patriotic Movement, Amal Movement, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party in¹ Lebanon, the Baath Party and others, especially in light of the absence of the March 14 coalition from influencing the scene or playing an active role in it.

The March 8 forces consider that the solution to Lebanon's economic crises is only through coordination and cooperation with the Syrian regime, and this was clearly expressed during the [parliamentary election programs](#) in 2018.



Iraq:

On 23 October 2017, former Iraqi Foreign Minister Iyad al-Jaafari explicitly expressed, for the first time, his country's position on the need for the Syrian regime to return to its seat in the Arab League.

Iraq had [rejected the vote](#) to suspend Syria's membership in the Arab League in 2011. During his visit to Damascus on 24 March 2015, Iyad al-Jafari tried to avoid expressing an explicit position during the [press conference](#) that he held with his then counterpart Walid al-Muallem.

He described the decision to represent Syria in the Arab League as an internal matter while stressing that the presence is supposed to be for the state and its representatives, not the opposition.

During his meeting with his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Mekdad, on the sidelines of the seventy-sixth session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on 22 September 2021, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iraq, Fouad Hussein, reaffirmed his country's position that efforts to restore the Syrian regime to its seat in the League of Arab States should continue.

(1) The 8 March forces are linked to a strategic alliance with the Syrian regime and/ or Iran, dating back to before the establishment of the alliance in 2005.



Iraq's position on the Syrian regime's re-membership of the Arab League can be understood from the fact that the government formed in 2014 and 2018 consists of blocs, parties and lists, most of which are close to Iran and the regime.

The delay in articulating the situation appears to have been related to the preoccupation with the country's political divide and the absence of appropriate conditions.

Therefore, it is noted that once the appropriate international environment is in place; that is, when Russia called for the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime in early 2017, Iraq hurried and was encouraged **to demand** the return of the latter's seat in the Arab League.

However, Iraq's political elite may be impressed by the model of Russian intervention in Syria, which calls for change through reform, not by the military force on which the United States depends, especially since Iyad al-Jafari has already expressed his country's rejection of the principle of change by force in 2015 during his meeting with Walid Almuallim.

The **call** of Muqtada al-Sadr, whose bloc won a parliamentary majority in the parliamentary elections in 2021, for Bashar al-Assad to step down from power in 2017, was never meant to be accepting the principle of change by military force, as his slogan is originally based on dialogue and reform, or even rejecting the normalization of relations with the regime. He may even respond to and support any trend in this regard, especially since he adopts Arab nationalist policies.



Egypt:

On 13 February 2017, the Arab Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives in Egypt [issued](#) a statement that considered that the Syrian regime's continued seat vacancy in the Arab League was unacceptable.

This position followed President Abdelfattah ElSisi's [announcement](#) on 23 November 2016 of Egypt's support for the Syrian regime's forces in regaining control and imposing stability on the country.

Since then, Egypt has not missed any formal opportunity to renew the [call](#) for the restoration of the Syrian regime to the Arab League. It seems that this is related to Egypt's keenness to achieve greater [consensus in visions](#) about the conflict and settlement in Syria with Russia, as the strengthening of the relationship with Russia gives it a greater ability to redefine its role in the Middle East region.

Clearly, Egypt hopes to play a greater role in Syria in cooperation with Russia, provided that the normalization of relations ensures the preservation of state institutions, specifically the army and armed forces, to be responsible for the task of reshaping the political system and imposing stability, similar to the Egyptian model. In addition to reducing the impact of the roles of [Turkey](#) and Iran in the region at the expense of the decline of the Arab role.

It also contributes to reducing the Muslim Brotherhood's access to power or the size of their influence if they play a role in it in the future.²

Of course, Egypt's endeavors to engage in efforts to normalize relations with the Syrian regime do not mean abandoning the support of some spectrum of the Syrian opposition, as one of the tools it relies on to play an influential role in a political settlement.

(2) Abdel Halim Kandil, "Egypt's Role in Syria". Al Quds Al Arabi, 22-4-2018. [Link](#)



Tunisia:

On 14 February 2015, Foreign Minister Tayeb Bakoush [said that](#) his country did not mind reopening the Syrian Embassy in Tunisia and resuming diplomatic and consular relations with the regime on the pretext of taking care of the interests of citizens and seeking solutions.

In so doing, Tunisia was the first country to explicitly call for the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime, but without taking a decision in this regard.

On 19 March 2017, a parliamentary delegation [visited](#) Damascus, a representative of four parliamentary blocs, Nidaa Tounes, the Left Popular Front, the Free Patriotic Union, and the Free Party, and met with Syrian regime President Bashar al-Assad, the first visit of Tunisian parliamentarians since the severance of relations in 2012.

A month after the visit, the same parliamentary blocs submitted a list to Parliament demanding the normalization of diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime, but the draft was [rejected](#) on 20 July 2017.

However, on 28 December 2018, Tunisia made its first flight to Syria after an interruption of more than 7 years. This was followed by the Tunisian Foreign Ministry's once again [expressing](#) its readiness and welcoming the reopening of the regime's embassy on its territory.

During the [election campaign](#) for Qais Saeed in 2019, who won the presidency of the Republic, he expressed an open position to refuse to sever diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime.

On 22 September 2021, Foreign Minister Osman al-Jarandi met with his Syrian counterpart, Faisal al-Meqdad, on the sidelines of the seventy-sixth session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and [reaffirmed](#) his country's position, which spares no effort to lift Arab and international isolation off the regime.



Clearly, Tunisia's failure to take any internal measures to normalize relations with the regime is mainly due to the preoccupation with the political division that the country is suffering from. Its stance to remove Arab isolation is attributed to the tendency of the Tunisian political elite to confront the rise of political Islam to power, albeit at the expense of the alliance with traditional regimes against which the Arab Spring revolutions have erupted since 2010.



Algeria:

On 25 April 2016, the Minister for Maghreb Affairs, the African Union, and the League of Arab States [visited](#) Algeria, Abdelkader Messahel Damascus, and met with Syrian regime President Bashar al-Assad.

This came after a [visit](#) to Algeria by the latter's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Walid Muallem, on 29 March of the same year.

On 17 April 2017, former Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika [sent](#) a message of congratulations to Bashar al-Assad on the seventy-first anniversary of Syria's independence.

During a [meeting](#) between the former Prime Minister of the Syrian regime, Imad Khamis, and the Ambassador of Algeria to Damascus, Saleh Boucha, on 25 September 2019, the latter confirmed his country's desire to expand trade and economic exchange between the two sides.

In mid-February 2020, the Algerian Foreign Minister, Sabri Boukadoum, [called upon](#) the League of Arab States to end the freeze on the Syrian regime's membership and to re-represent it in its meetings and activities. This came as Algeria was preparing to host the thirty-second session of the Arab League Summit.

On 6 February 2021, the Minister for [Foreign](#) Affairs of Algeria, Sabri Boukadoum, communicated with his Syrian counterpart, Fayssal Mekdad, emphasizing the continued cooperation and relations between the two countries.

On 24 August 2021, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Algeria, Ramtane Lamamra, renewed his country's support for the return of the Syrian regime to the League of Arab States and for attending the thirty-fourth session which Algeria was preparing to host. On 10 November 2021, Lamamra **reaffirmed** his country's efforts in search of an Arab consensus to ensure the return of the regime to the Arab League.

In 2011, Algeria had reservations about **the** decision to suspend the Syrian regime's membership in the Arab League, as it closed the door to any Arab solution to the crisis, and on those bases, the parties maintained diplomatic and consular relations.

Although Algeria attributes its position in Syria to the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other countries, it seems more related to concerns about the model of change by force that accompanied some of the Arab Spring revolutions, in addition to the keenness to maintain the historical relationship between the ruling authorities, specifically the military and security institutions with the regime in Syria.

Algeria was also keen on deepening relations with Russia through harmony with its policies regarding the issues of a political solution and Arab normalization, in the hope that this will open the way for Algeria to participate in the reconstruction process.

During a meeting with the Syrian regime's ambassador to Algeria on 2 February 2021, the Algerian Minister of Foreign Trade, Kamel Zureik, did not conceal his country's **desire** to participate in the reconstruction process in Syria, especially in the areas of cement, iron, and chemicals. That is despite the fact that Algeria has been suffering from an economic crisis since 2020 due to the outbreak of the Corona pandemic and the collapse of oil prices in global markets with the growing deficit in the trade balance.



United Arab Emirates:

On 27 December 2018, the United Arab Emirates **reopened** its embassy in Damascus at the level of Chargé d'affaires, 6 years after its closure, thus becoming the first Arab State to restore consular relations with the Syrian regime, except for those relations that the UAE had originally maintained in a manner that did not contradict the 2011 Arab League resolution.

This step encouraged the UAE to further test the possibility of re-normalization of official relations with the Syrian regime.

The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi made a phone call to Bashar al-Assad on 27 March 2020, and the two parties **called** again on 20 October 2021.

In an unprecedented move, UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed **visited** Damascus on 9 November 2021 and met Bashar Al-Assad.

However, since 2012, the UAE has maintained backdoor diplomacy in the relationship with the Syrian regime by hosting relatives of the Assad family, and businessmen close to him; and allowing or not objecting to the establishment of companies for Emirati businessmen in Syria since 2013, such as Abdullah al-Baluki.

The UAE is also suspected to have fueled the regime's air force in 2014, via the oil company Pangates International Corporation Limited, which **has been** black-listed by the US Treasury Department for sanctioned entities.

In general, the UAE would not support any change in the governance of Syria that contradicts with the shape or orientation of its political system. This in itself explains its stand with traditional regimes and military coups in the face of the regimes that resulted from the Arab Spring.

It can be said that Russia's intervention in Syria was welcomed, because it puts the reform model ahead of the projection supported by the United States. Therefore, the UAE was more keen to enhance cooperation with Russia, including preparing for the initiative and enduring what it might entail in leading the efforts to undo the Arab isolation imposed on the Syrian regime.



During the work of the fourth session of the "Russian-Arab" Cooperation Forum in early February 2017, which was hosted by Abu Dhabi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov considered that the continuation of cooperation and joint efforts between his country and the Arab countries must include making more efforts to reinstate the Syrian regime's membership in the Arab League.

It seems that the UAE is convinced that increasing the level of cooperation with Russia in conflict areas in the Middle East such as Syria, Libya and others can support its endeavors to redefine its role as a prominent regional power in the Arab region and compete with countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. On this basis, in June 2018, the UAE and Russia signed the Strategic Partnership Framework to enhance cooperation and joint coordination in various vital sectors.

If the UAE hopes to strengthen or maintain its position as an economic and commercial center for the non-oil sectors in the Middle East, it must also ensure a presence in the economic sector in Syria, which explains the acceleration [to activate](#) the "Syrian-Emirati" Businessmen Council in early October 2021.

The presence of the UAE in the economic sector in Syria constitutes a great opportunity for it to strengthen its strategy in playing a pivotal role by linking the countries of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which Bashar Al-Assad expressed [his readiness](#) to join on 5 November 2021.

But the UAE's presence in Syria's economic sector will be at the expense of Russia's and Iran's share. It can be believed that any step in this regard must be facilitated by Russia and Iran, or at the very least the latter should not object; otherwise, the UAE should enter into negotiations with them in exchange for the political and security gains it will provide to the regime.



Jordan:

On 29 September 2018, Jordan **reopened** the "Naseeb border crossing – Jaber border" in coordination with the Syrian regime, in preparation for the start of transport and trade between the two parties.

This step signaled or tested the possibility of gradually re-establishing relations between the regime and Jordan, which has not missed the opportunity to **upgrade** the level of diplomatic representation in Damascus to the level of Chargé d'affaires, as it has been limited to administrative staff since the severance of bilateral relations in May 2014.

On 4 March 2020, Jordanian Minister of Industry and Trade Tariq Hammouri visited Damascus. That move was the first of its kind by a government official since 2011. It was also preceded by a call for the normalization of trade relations between the two parties since the first **meeting** was held in Amman between the Chambers of Commerce of Jordan and Syria on 15 September 2019, followed by several meetings on 3 April 2021, and on 30 June 2021.

Therefore, Jordan's desire to normalize relations with the Syrian regime can be explained as a response to the pressure of businessmen who aspire to play a major role in the reconstruction of Syria, through the export of a range of services in the information technology, chemical raw materials, medicines, and other sectors; in addition to the operation of the Jordanian shipping sector by opening international roads to trade and transport.

But this is not enough to analyze Jordan's motives in normalizing relations with the regime, as it also seems to have a desire to achieve wider economic gains, with the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum succeeding in obtaining **an exemption** from the US sanctions under the "Caesar" law to reactivate the Arab gas line in order to provide Lebanon with energy.

Accordingly, on 8 September 2021, Jordan **hosted** a ministerial meeting of the Arab gas line countries, namely Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.



This followed previous meetings between delegations in June and August of the same year, during which a clear technical and time action plan was agreed upon.

It is assumed that the activation of the Arab gas line will contribute to granting Jordan economic returns from the cash allowance for the passage of gas through its territory, which may contribute to compensating for the losses it suffered during the previous years, in addition to meeting its need for electricity and gas at low prices.

Following a visit to Washington by King Abdullah bin Hussein II of Jordan, during which he met with US President Joe Biden on 19 July 2021, [he reaffirmed](#) his country's endeavor to restore the Syrian regime to the Arab League. Apparently, during the meeting, he presented a [proposal for a](#) solution in Syria through a [road map](#) based on a number of elements, namely, the removal of Arab isolation imposed on the regime, the reduction of economic sanctions, the removal of foreign forces with the exception of the Russian Federation, the fight against terrorism, the ceasefire, the flow of humanitarian aid across borders and lines, and political settlement within the framework of constitutional reform and under resolution 2254 (2015).

On 3 October 2021, the King of Jordan [made](#) contact with Bashar al-Assad, the first between the two since 2011. Prior to this, the regime's Minister of Defense, Ali Ayoub, [visited](#) Amman and met with Jordanian Chief of Staff Yusuf al-Hunayti on 20 September, during which they discussed a number of security issues.

In cases such as border security, Jordan appears to be counting on coordination with the regime itself, in the hope that the latter will ensure that the activities of local and Hezbollah networks in the area of drug, arms, and human trafficking are pursued and combated.

It is also clear that the King of Jordan looks forward to improving the position of his country as a guarantor of stability in the region, especially after the decline of this role at the expense of Egypt in the Palestinian issue, and he relies on improving relations with Russia.

The authority in Jordan must be apprehensive about the success of Syria's power-based model of change, which may encourage the resumption of a new wave of protests on its territory such as the one that erupted in 2012 against corruption and deteriorating living conditions. Therefore, Jordan may find itself in harmony with the model of change advocated by Russia and based on reform through cooperation with the regime in Syria and not vice versa.



The Sultanate Of Oman:

On 16 April 2020, the Sultan of Oman, Haitham bin Tariq, sent a congratulatory telegram to Syrian regime President Bashar al-Assad on the occasion of the Eid al-Jalaa, after which congratulatory messages were repeated between the two parties after the absence of public communication since 2011.

On 4 October 2020, Oman [reappointed its](#) extraordinary ambassador in Damascus, Mahmoud Al-Busaidi. Former Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi had previously visited Damascus in October 2015 and on 7 July 2019, at which time he met with Bashar al-Assad. It was preceded by the [visit](#) of the regime's Foreign Minister, Walid Al-Moualem Muscat, on 26 May 2018.

Oman is the only GCC country that has not formally severed diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime.

Oman's motivations for maintaining relations with the Syrian regime in the framework of secret diplomacy and then publicity seemed to be linked to its desire to maintain and activate mediation diplomacy between the Gulf Cooperation Council and the regime, such as Sultan Muhammad bin Alawi's September 2019 [offer](#) to Bashar al-Assad to remain in power in exchange for Iran's removal from the country.

In addition to mediating between the regime and the United States by providing partial solutions to outstanding issues such as the release of its American citizens.

Clearly, the Sultanate is **working** to improve the relationship with Russia in order to maintain the role of mediation in light of the intense competition for this form of diplomacy within the GCC.



Bahrain:

On 28 December 2018, Bahrain announced the **continuation** of work at its embassy in Damascus as well as at the Syrian embassy in Manama.

It was not clear from that declaration whether Bahrain had continued consular relations with the Syrian regime during the years of the conflict, especially since Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa had **said that** his country had not broken off its relations with Syria "despite difficult circumstances".

However, Bahrain avoided stating its position on the return of the Syrian regime to the Arab League, as it confined itself to the words of its ambassador in Russia, Ahmed Al-Saati, on 21 March 2019, **stressing** the need for unity of ranks and Arab consensus.

Overall, it can be said that the authority in Bahrain was opposed to changing governance in Syria, whether by force or through reform, and this was **expressed** in some way by the Minister for Foreign Affairs during his comment on the meeting he gathered with the regime's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Walid Al-Moualem, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meetings in New York on 30 September 2018.

It seems that Bahrain's hopes out of normalizing with the regime that Syria will not become one of the countries used by Iran to support the Bahraini opposition, as the case is with Iraq and Lebanon.

Bahrain must be counting on supporting its position in Syria on rapprochement with Russia and trying to show harmony with its policy.



This may be reflected in the [gift](#) that King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa presented to President Vladimir Putin on 9 February 2016, which was a Damascene sword that was named "Sword of Victory."

However, this position does not mean that Bahrain is not keen to show support for the aspirations of the Syrians, in order to send messages to the opposition on its territory; by trying to reduce restrictions on the activities of the Salafi movement in the Kingdom, similar to the visit made by some parliamentarians to areas outside the control of the regime in 2012, regardless of the [release](#) of the responsibility of the Bahraini Foreign Ministry.



Second: The effects and repercussions of Arab normalization with the Syrian regime

At the Arabs level:

When the League of Arab States [suspended](#) Syria's membership in it as of 16 November 2011, it was a result of the regime's refusal to abide by the [Arab plan of action](#), which includes the cessation of all acts of violence, the release of detainees, the evacuation of cities and residential neighborhoods from armed demonstrations, and the opening of the way for League organizations to see the reality of the situation in the country.

On 11 March 2021, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Qatar, Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman Al-Thani, [said](#) that the reasons for Syria's suspension from the Arab League remained valid. Referring to the objectives of the plan of action, including the contribution of the Arab States to finding a political solution leading to reform, avoiding external interference, halting violence, and preserving Syria's security, stability, and unity.

Indeed, after 10 years of conflict, it does not seem possible to achieve the goals demanded by the Arab countries merely by relying on diplomacy, in the absence of the military and security presence previously [rejected](#) by the regime in 2011.

Therefore, the effect of Arab normalization, whether independent or shared, may be limited to the goals of each individual country at a minimum, if some of them do not face disappointment, such as the stalled experience of Bahrain in Iraq in 2008, when it reappointed its ambassador in Baghdad before any Gulf state, to reassess this position in 2011 by accusing Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon of supporting the Bahraini opposition.



Iranian:

On 15 November 2021, Iran **expressed** satisfaction with the Arab countries' open normalization of their relations with the Syrian regime, considering that this step is in the interests of all countries in the region, and that Tehran not only welcomes this path but also does its best to accelerate relations between the Arab countries and the Syrian regime.

Although the restoration of Arab relations with the Syrian regime may be at the expense of Iran's share in the economic sector, the latter's welcome of normalization endeavors means that it views them as an opportunity to normalize its influence in Syria militarily, economically, politically and socially.

Iran has worked in previous years to consolidate its influence in various sectors of Syria, and it will not be difficult for it to market its role to the detriment of the Arab and Syrian presence, including declaring its readiness to withdraw its forces from Syria.

These steps would provide an environment conducive to Iran in order to turn what it has achieved in Syria into real gains, especially the preservation of a system of governance that would guarantee its vital interests under the strategic alliance with it.

Russian:

During Abu Dhabi's hosting of the fourth session of the "Russian-Arab" Cooperation Forum on 1 February 2017, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov for the first time **called** for the renewal of the Syrian regime's membership in the Arab League as a necessary step for the continuation of cooperation and joint efforts between his country and the Arab countries.

Since then, Russia has been encouraging Arab countries to normalize with the Syrian regime, and it seems to hope that this step will contribute to the removal of international isolation from it in preparation for the return of refugees and marketing to provide an environment of stability that helps investment and the start of reconstruction projects.



American:

On September 2021 ,29, in response to a question about whether the United States supports rapprochement between Jordan and the Syrian regime, the State Department **said said** that Washington has no plans to upgrade diplomatic relations with the latter, and does not encourage anyone to do so.

When Jordan announced the resumption of commercial flights with the Syrian regime on October 3rd, the United States State Department simply **said** on the 28th of September that it was revising the announcement.

While the situation was clearer when the Sultanate of Oman raised the level of diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime; it called on it to reverse this decision.

Regardless of the divergence in positions that seem to be significantly related to the different policies between the administration of Presidents Donald Trump and his successor Joe Biden on Syria, the United States is very **familiar** with the effects of normalization with the regime from its undermining the security and stability of the region; with the regime continuing to violate international law and the frequent use of chemical weapons, and **facilitating** drug trafficking and transport operations beyond borders.

However, this step means undermining any efforts to promote investigation and accountability for the crimes and violations for which the Syrian regime was responsible, thereby eroding the image of the United States as a force capable of protecting international law, and encouraging more countries to bypass the latter.

Normalization may also undermine counterterrorism efforts, not vice versa. ISIS will not miss the opportunity to benefit from the rejection of the regime by local communities in providing a new environment to expand its activities and regain its strength.

In any case, it cannot be believed that normalization may lead to a change in the regime's behavior and may even lead to a greater desire for impunity and sanctions and the restoration of its capabilities with an Arabic cover.



Third: The Fate of Arab Normalization Initiatives

1. Scenario 1 – stalled efforts

The thirty-fourth session of the Arab Summit is expected to be held in Algiers in March 2022. At that time, it is assumed that efforts to restore Arab relations with the regime will result in inviting Bashar al-Assad to attend its works, but this seems difficult, which is discussed in this scenario, as normalization will face deadlocks or stalled efforts.

Originally, the regime **needs** to reinstate its membership to the Arab League, which means to end its isolation from it, and there is agreement or consensus among member states, and this does not seem to be available. The number of those who call for normalization of relations or welcome them is at least 12 countries: Mauritania, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, and the Sultanate of Oman. Qatar and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, have reservations about any resumption of relations. The position of many States, such as the Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, the Comoros, and Libya, remains unknown.

Until the end of October 2021, the League of Arab States **had not received** a formal or informal request for the return of the regime to fill Syria's seat in the League, which means that the positions of Member States continue to be limited to internal coordination and/ or separate normalization.

It seems that there are some obstacles that still limit the adoption of a common decision among Member States, such as the continuation of Western economic sanctions, which means that any potential investments in Syria must be covered by the sanctions except for those related to the exceptions granted by the US Treasury Department, and this may be discouraging, especially if accountability mechanisms are activated that put countries before the responsibility of not complying with procedures related to violation of international law.



On the other hand, some Arab countries may find themselves facing the necessity of adhering to the policies of the United States in the event that the latter pledges to provide tangible guarantees to protect the security of the region and restore stability, thus descending on diplomatic pressures and freezing normalization initiatives with the regime.

This means that economic and commercial agreements and diplomatic initiatives with the regime will not be activable, similar to many understandings that were concluded with Iran and remained mere [ink on paper](#), if some Arab countries do not take steps back as a result of the blockage of the horizon that was being relied upon to obtain gains from the resumption of relations.

2. Scenario 2 – Conditional Success:

On 11 November 2021, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry [said that](#) his country had no intention at the moment to send a delegation to Syria, indicating a lack of willingness to take a similar step to that of the UAE.

It can be said that many Arab countries, especially those working to break the isolation of the Syrian regime, are still not ready to normalize relations with it, but they may nonetheless experience ways of doing so within certain borders, not completely, which is assumed by this scenario, given that normalization will be conditional.

Like Iraq, which hosted the Baghdad Conference on Cooperation and Partnership on 28 August 2018, Algeria may also be careful not to be so keen to have the Assad regime attend the works of the Arab summit, in order not to raise contentious issues, despite the conviction of both countries that it is necessary for it to participate.

Thus, Bashar al-Assad does not seem to have any chance of attending the Arab summit in Algiers, but this does not exclude the possibility of receiving a diplomatic delegation within a low representation on the grounds of the need for joint coordination in humanitarian, development, and security issues, which are pretexts that some countries have already [resorted](#) to explaining the reason for the reactivation of their diplomatic missions in Syria after a break of almost 10 years.



Accordingly, the normalization of diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime may remain limited by a decision not shared between the Arab countries, and limited to consular relations with missions with specific tasks in the humanitarian and development framework, and security relations.

This is also evidenced by the participation of the Director of the General Intelligence Department of the regime, Hossam Luka, in the work of the first session of the Arab Intelligence Forum [held](#) in Cairo on 9 November 2021, despite his inclusion in the US sanctions lists.

Economic relationships may remain constrained within the limits of exemptions or [licenses](#) granted by the United States for limited humanitarian and development issues or framed for early recovery.

The UAE, for example, although one of the first countries to resort to normalization with the regime, on 9 March 2021, did not hide the [difficulty](#) of joint work and coordination with the regime under US sanctions.

In fact, this conditional form of Arab normalization with the regime does not mean that it is linked to mere fears of Western sanctions.

It is also related to Arab fears of the feasibility of large and rapid involvement in efforts to break international isolation from it, especially in the absence of the ability to measure the desire and seriousness of the regime to respond to the concerns and interests of Arab countries, whether jointly or separately.

That is, the Arab states are supposed to be wary of any full normalization with the regime before testing its intentions towards coordination and joint action, which may also include the political process and the implementation of resolution 2254 (2015).

Conclusion

When Arab Foreign Ministers were at a preparatory meeting for the "Nouakchott" summit on 23 July 2016, there was a **great** deal of controversy over Syria's seat, as some countries asked to grant it to the opposition while the majority rejected it and maintained the status quo pending a political settlement under resolution 2254 (2015).

However, the discussions differed completely after that, as the member countries began to discuss ways to restore the regime to occupy Syria's seat in the Arab League, and this change in direction seemed to be linked to or motivated by Russia's policies that have been initiated since 2017 to encourage the Arab countries to normalize relations with the regime.

In any case, although the efforts to break the regime's isolation were mostly in the form of coordinated initiatives from the Arab countries, they did not lead to the development of a common position, except for the absence of a clear vision, while different views or approaches prevailed over the goals of normalization, which had a role in not developing a unified position, and may later restrict the ability to influence the regime itself, and thus the difficulty of achieving what those countries hope to achieve at the individual level of political, economic and security interests.



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