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Rehabilitating Assad: The Arab League Embraces a Pariah

by [David Schenker](#)

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Brief Analysis

Parochial interests and war fatigue are driving many member states to support premature elections and normalization with Damascus, but this approach will only consolidate Assad's control and help him evade accountability for war crimes.

In recent weeks, momentum has been building toward reintegrating Syria into the Arab League. The country was suspended from the organization in November 2011, eight months into a brutal regime suppression effort that had killed 5,000 civilians. Ten years on and with an estimated 500,000 dead, several Arab states—encouraged by Russia—are taking steps to end the decade-long isolation of Bashar al-Assad and restore Syria's membership. Although the Arab League is an archaic, dysfunctional, and largely irrelevant organization, the move is nevertheless significant for what it signals: a greater regional willingness to engage with Assad politically and economically. Consistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), U.S. policy has premised any such reengagement on a valid political transition, but regional states may undermine the prospects for real change by welcoming Damascus back into the fold prematurely.

Increased Arab Engagement

Upon suspending Syria for refusing to implement the Arab League peace plan in 2011, the organization levied a series of sanctions that included travel bans on some senior regime officials and limitations on investments and dealings with the Central Bank of Syria. With the exception of Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, all league members enacted and at least partially enforced these measures for the better part of a decade, largely due to concerns that

Western countries might sanction them if they did not comply.

Over the past few years, however, a number of Arab states began pressing to end Syria's suspension, spurred by economic exigencies, fatigue with the war, regional rivalries, and a growing sense that the Assad regime had prevailed. Senior Trump administration officials pushed back against these efforts, but contacts between Arab capitals and Damascus nevertheless intensified from 2016 to 2020, with several states reopening their shuttered embassies and reposting senior diplomats.

The United Arab Emirates has been among the most insistent of these advocates. Despite initially supporting the rebels, Abu Dhabi reopened its embassy in Damascus in December 2018 and has since called for reinstating the country's Arab League membership. The idea gained further traction this March after Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov toured the UAE and other Gulf states. At a joint press conference during Lavrov's visit, Emirati foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed disparaged Washington's approach to the matter and lamented that U.S. economic restrictions such as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act "make the matter difficult." He then called for the reconstruction of postwar Syria.

The UAE has not been alone in its outreach:

- Tunisia reopened its embassy in 2015, posting a mid-tier diplomat to Damascus.
- Oman returned its ambassador to Syria in October 2020, the first Gulf state to do so. Five months later, the Syrian ambassador accredited to Muscat stated that the two countries had agreed to "boost investments" and trade.
- Jordan dispatched a charge d'affaires to Damascus in 2019, filling a slot that had been empty since 2012.
- Egyptian foreign minister Sameh Shoukry announced last month that Cairo supported Arab normalization with Syria, shortly after his meeting with Lavrov.
- Iraq hosted Syria's minister of petroleum last week, in part to negotiate a deal for importing Egyptian natural gas via Syria.
- Saudi Arabia dispatched its intelligence chief to Damascus for talks with his Syrian counterpart on May 3, which the *Guardian* described as "the first known meeting of its kind since the outbreak of the war." They reportedly discussed reopening embassies.
- Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan will soon hold a meeting in Baghdad focused on reintegrating Syria into the region, according to an April report in *Asharq al-Awsat*.

A range of parochial motivations appear to be driving this embrace. For the UAE, reintegrating Assad and rebuilding Syria holds the promise of ending Turkey's deployment in Idlib, where the Emirati adversary has stationed troops to prevent additional refugee flows. Jordan seems driven primarily by a desire to help its economy, repatriate refugees, reestablish consistent trade, and restore overland transportation through Syria en route to Turkey and Europe. In this regard, Washington's Caesar Act restrictions continue to irritate Amman.

More broadly, Egyptian officials seemingly subscribe to the dubious idea that Syria's reentry into the league would gradually accentuate its "Arabism" and thereby move Damascus away from Persian Iran. Other regional states likely share similar views; even some Israeli national security figures improbably assess that Russia may limit Iranian encroachment in postwar Syria under Assad.

Most Arab states—particularly Egypt—also seem prepared to accept the charade of Syria's imminent presidential election as evidence of a political transition. During his April 12 press conference with Lavrov, Foreign Minister Shoukry declared that the planned May 26 vote would allow the Syrian people to "choose their future...and form a government that represents them," despite the inevitability of rigged results in Assad's favor.

Defying the UN, Ignoring War Crimes

Efforts to rehabilitate the Assad regime are inconsistent with Security Council Resolution 2254, which outlines the need for free and fair elections with diaspora participation, the writing of a new constitution, and other prerequisites that Syria has not yet met. The resolution also stipulates full implementation of the June 2012 Geneva Communiqué, which called for a full political transition to a democratic, nonsectarian Syrian state that respects human rights.

Beyond these still-distant political goals, engaging Assad also ignores the need to hold the regime accountable for its “massive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law,” in the words of UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres. Technically, these violations fall short of the international definition of “genocide,” but the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum has characterized them as “brutal crimes against humanity and war crimes.” During an April address to the General Assembly, Guterres reiterated that those responsible for such crimes—including the use of chemical weapons against civilians—should no longer enjoy impunity. “Perpetrators,” he said, “must be held to account.”

Arab League Cynicism

The league’s 2011 decision to suspend Syria was astounding at the time because the organization had seldom if ever demonstrated distaste for its members’ crimes against humanity. In March 2009, for example, it hosted Sudanese president Omar Bashir at a Qatar summit just weeks after he was indicted by the International Criminal Court for ordering the murder of nearly 500,000 civilians in Darfur.

A decade later, this willingness to overlook human rights violations is seemingly returning to the fore. On April 21, Syria was stripped of its voting rights in the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, a decision supported by eighty-seven OPCW member states. Yet eight Arab League states abstained from the vote, including Jordan and Iraq, whose own Kurdish population was subject to chemical attacks during the Saddam Hussein era. Another league member, Palestine, was among the fifteen opposing votes, joining the likes of Iran and Russia. Elsewhere, the league has failed to condemn the genocide being perpetrated against Chinese Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. To the contrary, Beijing noted that the organization explicitly supported “China’s just position on...Xinjiang” during the July 2020 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum meeting in Amman.

Policy Implications

Despite the disappearing Arab commitment to Resolution 2254 and the long odds against success, Washington should continue to press for change in Syria. Admittedly, regional fatigue with the war and refugee crisis is growing, but Syria under Assad will never be a safe haven for these millions of exiles to return. Likewise, readmitting Syria to the Arab League and funding postwar reconstruction will not prompt Assad to break the regime’s forty-year [strategic relationship with Tehran](#). Rather, normalizing with Damascus would simply alleviate pressure on the regime and enable it to further consolidate power.

Notwithstanding the growing acceptance of Assad in Arab capitals—and even Israel—his rehabilitation is not inevitable. To forestall the collapse of the processes enshrined in Resolution 2254, however, the Biden administration will have to reassert leadership, assigning a [new envoy or other empowered senior official](#) to coordinate the international approach with Europe and regional states.

Washington should also reject Syria’s imminent presidential election, which will assuredly hand Assad another seven-year mandate even as Arab League members attempt to characterize it as a “transition.” Instead, U.S. officials should work with European partners to shape international consensus regarding the election’s failure to meet the “free and fair” requirements laid out in Resolution 2254.

Concurrently, the United States should **increase its humanitarian efforts** in Syria and prevail on those Gulf states leading the normalization charge to provide additional assistance as well, especially in areas outside regime jurisdiction. Assad remains in control of Damascus and its environs, but the decisions to use chemical weapons and commit other mass atrocities against the Syrian people are beyond the pale and should preclude his rehabilitation. At this point, however, only the United States can prevent that outcome.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute. From 2019 to January 2021, he served as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. ❖



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