# How to Explain the Arab League's Shocking Decision on Syria?

by David Schenker **(/experts/david-schenker)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Schenker (/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

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## Although the Arab League's new sanctions on the Asad regime are welcome, they are unlikely to result in real transformation within the organization.

In March 2009, the Arab League welcomed Sudanese President Omar Bashir at its summit in Qatar. Just weeks earlier, Bashir had been indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) -- and a warrant issued for his arrest -- for war crimes and crimes against humanity in the murder of nearly 500,000 civilians in Darfur. No matter. The Arab League rejected ICC jurisdiction as an illegal violation of Sudanese sovereignty.

But now, in the months since the Arab Spring began, the Arab League seems to have undergone a transformation. First the organization supported NATO air operations against Qaddafi in Libya. Then it suspended Syria from the organization. And now it has taken steps to level unprecedented sanctions against Syria's Bashar Al Assad regime in an attempt to end the government's crackdown on protests that has already killed more than 4,000 people. So what accounts for the Arab League's differing approaches to Bashir and Bashar? Has the longtime dysfunctional, ineffective, and cynical institution changed?

The Arab League, much like the United Nations, is an amalgam of states with vastly divergent interests and policies -- but, in general, its members have shown little interest in speaking out against the atrocities of autocratic rulers lest the legitimacy of their own regimes be called into question. Until quite recently, for example, many of these Middle Eastern states, in particular the conservative monarchies of the Gulf, seemed to be hoping that Assad would remain in power because they feared his demise might spur further regional rebellions. Amazingly, even Egypt, which had just endured its own bloody revolt earlier in the year, for a time also appeared inclined to keep Assad in power. This August, after the regime had already killed some 2,000 protestors, the Arab League Secretary General, an Egyptian diplomat named Nabil Elaraby, suggested that there was "still a chance for the reforms that were announced by President Bashar Al Assad to be accomplished."

Yet other capitals have sided openly with the protestors. Post-tyrant governments in Tunis and Tripoli went so far as to remove Assad regime diplomatic personnel and turn over the keys to Syria's embassies to members of the opposition. The tiny Gulf emirate of Qatar has likewise emerged as head cheerleader in the growing chorus to topple Assad.

Given these divisions, it seemed unlikely that the League would act decisively against Syria. But after nine months of ruthless repression, with the demonstrations showing no sign of abating and a growing international consensus that Assad had to go, it was increasingly clear that the regime was in trouble. Adding to the regime's bleak survival prospects this fall were painful energy sanctions from Europe and the E.U., which have pushed the Syrian economy to the brink. Finally, the failure of a last ditch Arab League initiative in mid-November ended remaining hopes to engineer a diplomatic solution to the conflict. These factors combined to convince Arab states that Assad was finished, paving the way for collective action to condemn him.

Moreover, once other Arab rulers had lost faith in Assad's ability to maintain power, taking strong actions against his regime could more rightly be seen as damage control than as a bold or risky move. After all, hastening Assad's demise would not only save lives and perhaps forestall a civil war -- it might stem the contagion of yet another successful revolt. In Riyadh and in other Gulf states the thinking probably is, at least in part, that if regime change is to occur, then it would be well if it was done quickly and with the approval of other Arab regimes -- lest the euphoria of Syria embolden other presently docile Arab populations. At the same time, in a region where the nightly news of atrocities has earned the Assad regime the hatred of millions, the Arab League's actions put the rest of the Arab governments on the side of the Arab people. With Assad likely on his way out anyway, piling onto the U.S. and European Union sanctions was a no brainer.

The stars -- and national interests -- aligned, in other words, for the Arab League when it came to dealing with Syria. But it's difficult to imagine this kind of Arab League coordination will occur again anytime soon. More likely, when the upheavals subside, the league will revert to its more natural state of preoccupation with Israel and disinterest in intra-Arab violence, a la 1990, when only 12 of 20 voting states condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and 2009, when the Doha Arab Summit denounced the egregious meddling of the international community in the internal affairs of Sudan while condemning Israel for its Gaza incursion. In Libya and now in Syria, Washington has made Arab League support a prerequisite for humanitarian intervention in the Middle East. For the Arab League, however, the consensus reached on Libya and Syria represents the triumph of pragmatism rather than any newfound humanitarianism.

To be sure, the resolutions on Syria contained in the Arab League's November 27 declaration are impressive. In addition to banning travel and freezing the assets of senior Assad regime officials and personalities, the document prohibits foreign direct investment in the state and mandates an end to financial transactions with both the Central and Commercial Banks of Syria. Importantly, the resolution also proposes a moratorium on flights to and from Syria, tasking a committee to determine when the suspension should go into effect. If the resolution is implemented -- if the committee actually meets, determines a date certain to end flights, and names the regime officials subject to sanction -- it would be a real accomplishment, reflecting the impact of the wider upheavals in the region on the institution. But drawing sweeping conclusions from this latest move seems unwise; it is unlikely that it represents real organizational transformation within the Arab League.

Qatar -- the only Arab state with planes in the air and boots on the ground during Libya -- epitomizes the current paradox of the Arab League, which oddly has become seen in recent months as an arbiter of international legitimacy in the region. Through its voice in the Arab League and via its ubiquitous Al Jazeera broadcasts, the small country is shedding light on the ongoing barbarism in Syria and leading the charge at the Arab League Headquarters in Cairo for the removal of Assad. But just this October, Qatar's Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani was also hosting Sudan's

Omar Bashir for economic and investment talks in Doha.

*David Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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