

Syria and the Arab League: A Reconciliation Foretold

Ignacio Álvarez-Ossorio Alvaríño¹

Professor of Arabic and Islamic studies
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

After twelve years of wandering across the desert, Bashar al-Assad has taken a giant step towards normalizing relations with his neighbours. On 7 May 2023, a summit of foreign ministers in Cairo approved Syria's readmission to the Arab League. This despite the fact that the Syrian regime has committed multiple war crimes and crimes against humanity and that the Syrian War has caused the deaths of more than 500,000 people, as well as the exodus of 13 million Syrians who have now become displaced persons or refugees. In addition, the fate of 100,000 missing persons, most of them at the hands of the regime, has yet to be clarified.

The communiqué issued by the Arab foreign ministers stated: "We insist on the need to take effective, practical measures towards a gradual resolution of the crisis under a 'one step at a time' principle." According to this logic, normalization would be contingent on the Syrian president's progressive implementation of Security Council Resolution 2254 of 23 December 2015. This resolution, passed after the Russian military intervention and the capture of Aleppo, called for starting negotiations with the opposition, forming an interim government, adopting a new constitution and holding legislative and presidential elections under international supervision within 18 months. Since its adoption, al-Assad has refused to apply it, believing he is in a position of strength and that time is on his side.

The first step in the process of al-Assad's international rehabilitation was taken by the then Emirati Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed Al Nahyan in 2018, who decided to reopen the embassy in Damascus and resume diplomatic relations, as did Bahrain. On 18 March 2022, the Emirati leader received the Syrian president in Abu Dhabi in what was his first official visit to an Arab country since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. As a report by the Unit for Political Studies of the Arab Center in Doha (2023) points out, "The UAE [...] saw the popular Syrian revolution in 2011 as an opportunity to contain Iranian influence in the region [...]. But the Emirati position changed radically with the transformation of Abu Dhabi into an avowed opponent of the Arab revolutions, and it distanced itself from the Syrian opposition before eventually pledging support for the Syrian regime [...]."

The Step-by-Step Approach

The main driving force behind the step-by-step strategy is Jordan, which finds itself in a delicate situation not only because of the presence of 660,000 Syrian refugees on its territory (according to UNHCR data from March 2023), but also because it has become a nerve centre in the drug trafficking network linked to the Syrian regime that distributes Captagon to the countries of the region. Jordanian diplomacy interprets that the Syrian crisis has reached an impasse and that it is essential to take up the initiative again to unblock the situation.

On 6 May 2023, London's *al-Majalla* magazine exclusively published the contents of the Jordanian proposal from two years earlier, which offered various

¹ Author of *Siria. La década negra (2011-2021)*.

incentives to the Syrian regime to implement Resolution 2254, including its return to the Arab League and the progressive lifting of international sanctions. In return, the document called on the Syrian regime to provide “a safe environment for the voluntary return of the displaced and refugees,” and to grant “the UNHCR full access to the areas concerned, to ensure [...] that they are not persecuted” (Hamidi, 2023). The main problem, as Professor Steve Heydemann stresses, is that “if ‘step-for-step’ diplomacy becomes accepted as a framework for normalizing the Assad regime, the eventual outcome will be the erasure of its responsibility for the destruction of Syria and all that has accompanied it.” (Hamidi, 2023). (Heydemann, 2022). One of the main purposes of Jordan’s 2021 initiative was to reduce Iran’s influence in the Middle East. From the early stages of the war, the Iranian regime actively supported al-Assad by deploying various Shiite militias that, at their peak, mobilized up to 50,000 troops. In this regard, the Jordanian document noted with concern: “Iran continues to impose its economic and military influence on the Syrian regime and several vital parts of Syria, taking advantage of the suffering of the population to recruit militias [...]. Iran’s allies are growing stronger in the country’s key areas and drug trafficking generates significant revenue for these groups while posing a growing threat to the region.”

Another element to take into account is that several neighbouring countries fear that if the situation becomes entrenched, or even worse, deteriorates, Syria will become a failed state. The economic situation is catastrophic, with 90% of the population living below the poverty line and 80% in a situation of food insecurity. Meanwhile, inflation is rising (more than 150% in the last year alone) and the Syrian pound is devaluing (7,000 pounds to the dollar, as compared to 50 pounds to the dollar in 2010). In recent months there have been new mobilizations in much of the country, including in the regime’s traditional strongholds, to protest against the high cost of living and the lack of job prospects, which could trigger a new outbreak of violence.

Chinese Mediation between Riyadh and Tehran

The severe earthquake that struck southern Turkey and northern Syria on 6 February 2023 accelerated

the Syrian regime’s rehabilitation process, as Egypt, Jordan and the Emirates sent their foreign ministers to Damascus where they pledged to provide humanitarian aid, despite the fact that the most affected areas were in the hands of rebel groups such as the Levant Liberation Organization (commanded by the defunct al-Nusra Front). Riding this wave of solidarity, President al-Assad travelled to Muscat on 20 February, where he was received by Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said. A month later, on 19 March, he visited Abu Dhabi where he met for the second time with Muhammad bin Zayed.

The signing of a reconciliation agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia on 10 March 2023 under Chinese mediation was followed by the restoration of diplomatic relations and various efforts to reduce regional tension. On 12 April, Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad visited Jeddah where he met with his Saudi counterpart Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud. The statement following the meeting stressed Saudi willingness to contribute to “the search for a political solution to the Syrian crisis that preserves the unity, security and stability of Syria and facilitates the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland.” On the 18th of the same month, Al Saud visited Damascus where he announced the restoration of relations after meeting with President al-Assad. The Foreign Minister justified this turnaround by citing the need to find a solution that would “preserve its Arab identity and return Syria to its Arab environment.” With this step, Saudi Arabia reaffirmed its centrality in the Arab system and made a Copernican turn from its previous positions, opting for soft-power rather than hard-power tools such as those used in the intervention in Yemen in 2015 or the blockade of Qatar in 2017.

President Ebrahim Raisi also took advantage of the new situation to visit Damascus, where he met with al-Assad on 3 May, in the first visit by an Iranian leader since 2010. The aim of the trip was to emphasize that the normalization of relations with the Arab world did not imply questioning the Syrian presence in the so-called Axis of Resistance (which also includes Iran and Hezbollah). In a speech delivered at the Sayyida Zeinab Shiite shrine, the Iranian leader stated that: “After 12 years of war, Syria has emerged victorious and we have gathered here to celebrate this victory,” underlining the crucial central role played by Iran in defending its main regional ally.

Even Turkey, which for years was one of the opposition's main backers, has also taken steps to resume relations with the Syrian regime. It should be recalled that the presence of 3.5 million Syrian refugees on Turkish territory (who are concentrated in the southern provinces, precisely those hardest hit by the earthquake) has become a headache for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The opposition has turned Syrian refugees into a scapegoat for the country's economic crisis. On 10 May, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu met with his Syrian counterpart in Moscow as part of the Adana Process. Among the issues discussed was the possibility of a gradual return of refugees to Syria. In exchange, Damascus reportedly requested the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syrian territory, as well as the cessation of Turkish support for the Syrian National Army.

The Unknowns of the Normalization Process

The regional rehabilitation of al-Assad could reopen the debate over the country's reconstruction. It seems clear that Russia and Iran, Damascus' two main allies, are not in a position to take a leading role in the reconstruction process, as they have other priorities, such as maintaining the war effort in Ukraine and controlling the economic crisis that is rocking the Persian country. Nor is China interested in taking part in this process, given that Syria lacks significant hydrocarbon reserves and, furthermore, its territory does not fall within the Belt and Road Initiative's trade routes. Hence, the Gulf monarchies are the only ones with the necessary financial muscle to take on a reconstruction that requires an investment of at least 400 billion dollars, according to different estimates.

Re-joining the Arab League puts an end to 12 years of Syrian isolation, but does not imply that all countries will immediately re-establish diplomatic relations. The most reluctant to do so remain Qatar, Kuwait, Morocco and Yemen. Probably the most dangerous aspect of such rehabilitation is that it sends a message of impunity to other Arab leaders, since human rights violations and war crimes seem to go unpunished. As The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (2023) notes, "normalization not only symbolically condones these crimes, but will likely increase the government's economic resourc-

es, further empowering criminal behaviour." In the opinion of Professor Gregory Aftandilian (2023), "the outreach to Syria can also be seen as a policy of realpolitik [...]. All of these regimes are more concerned with political survival than the welfare of their citizens, and likely consider that if the Assad regime had to resort to draconian policies in order to survive, then so be it. One day, these regimes themselves may face a similar type of rebellion, and they do not want to be ostracized regionally and internationally if they resort to similar practices."

The main question to be answered is whether the US will follow this line or, as everything seems to indicate, will maintain sanctions on the Syrian regime. The EU, for its part, continues to hold its traditional position, considering that the lifting of sanctions should be conditional on the implementation of Resolution 2254 and interpreting that al-Assad cannot play a role in post-war Syria.

References

- AFTANDILIAN, Gregory. "Arab States Are Normalizing with Syria's Assad Regime." In *Arab Center Washington DC*, 28 March 2023: <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-states-are-normalizing-with-syrias-assad-regime/>.
- HAMIDI, Ibrahim. "Classified document reveals details of bringing Syria back to Arab League." *Al-Majalla*, 6 May 2023: <https://en.majalla.com/node/290821/politics/classified-document-reveals-details-bringing-syria-back-arab-league>.
- HEYDEMANN, Steven. "Assad's normalization and the politics of erasure in Syria." In *Brookings Institution*, January 13 2022: www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/01/13/assads-normalization-and-the-politics-of-erasure-in-syria/.
- THE SYRIA JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY CENTRE. "Syria's Normalization: An Opportunity for Reform?" 13 April 2023: <https://syriaaccountability.org/syrias-normalization-an-opportunity-for-reform/>.
- UNIT FOR POLITICAL STUDIES. "Syria Normalization: Regional and International Implications." Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha Institute, 6 February 2023: www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/syria-normalization-regional-and-international-implications.aspx.