

Assad Returns to the Arab League—U.S. Diplomacy Stumbles



In this photo provided by Saudi Press Agency, SPA, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, left, greets Syrian President Bashar Assad during the Arab summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Friday, May 19, 2023. (Saudi Press Agency via AP)

by Eric Rozenman

Bashar al-Assad appears to have won Syria's devastating 12-year civil war. The 21-nation Arab League (22 with the inclusion of the notional entity of "Palestine"), which suspended Syria early in the fighting, welcomed it back in May. The turn-about indicates that not only have Assad and his minority Alawite-led dictatorship survived, but also that their Russian and Iranian backers have gained.

Syria's Arab League return also suggests that in the contest for Middle East influence, the United States has suffered a setback. For Israel, Assad's survival and Syria's restoration in the Arab League "absolutely changes the dynamics" of its struggle with Iran, according to David Adesnik, director of research at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies think tank.

For the United States, Walter Russell Mead, Hudson Institute distinguished fellow in statesmanship and strategy, wrote in a May column for *The Wall Street Journal*, "the Arab League move is part of a wider trend that Washington can't afford to ignore. It isn't only nondemocratic countries like the Gulf Arab states tilting toward Russia and China these days. Democracies like Brazil and South Africa are rejecting American pleas to rally behind democratic Ukraine against autocratic Russia. Across the so-called Global South, few countries, democratic or not, are rushing to enlist in President Biden's anti-autocracy crusade."

In 2011, during the "Arab Spring" turmoil that also shook Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, protests erupted in Syria against Assad's rule. His forces fired on demonstrators and soon were shot at in return. What began as demands for reform quickly slid into an anti-government insurgency, then civil war.

Regime assaults did not distinguish between armed opponents and civilians. The United States and European Union soon imposed sanctions on Assad and his allies.

Their aim, one European Union diplomat said at the time, "is to stop the violence and press Assad to agree to a process of reform, but not force him to step down." US President Barack Obama sounded sterner:

"The Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy. President Assad now has a choice: he

can lead that transition, or get out of the way. The Syrian government must stop shooting demonstrators and allow peaceful protests, release political prisoners and stop unjust arrests, they must allow human rights monitors to have access ... and start a serious dialogue to [advance a democratic transition.](#)"

No big stick

Obama noted that Syria had followed its ally Iran in battling anti-regime demonstrations and sought assistance from Tehran in what he termed "tactics of suppression."

Washington talked tough at first. But it didn't carry much of a stick. Neither did the EU.

Obama drew a red line against the use of chemical weapons but didn't enforce it.

So, suppress his enemies Assad did. From early in the fighting, when the Arab League suspended Syria's participation, until May of this year, when the organization welcomed Assad back, an estimated 5.5 million Syrians fled the country. Another 6.8 million of the pre-war population of 22 million were displaced internally—the two migrations constituting [the biggest contemporary humanitarian crisis](#), according to the United Nations.

As for the dead, the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights asserted this spring it had tallied 613,000, [503,000 by name](#). Of this, SOHR said 162,000 were civilians—49,000 tortured to death in regime prisons and security centers—and 341,000 combatants. The latter included Assad's forces, soldiers from or militia backed by Iran and Russia, Lebanese Hezbollah, Syrian Democratic Forces, Kurdish fighters, ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) terrorists, non-ISIS jihadis, other rebel factions and more. The observatory said another 2.1 million civilians were wounded.

In 2018, President Donald Trump ordered US airstrikes against

three Syrian chemical weapons facilities after news reports of a deadly CW attack [by Assad's forces against civilians](#). The United Kingdom and France participated in the American-led retaliation.

But in announcing the strike, and calling Assad “a monster,” Trump also said the United States “does not seek an indefinite presence in Syria. ... We look forward to the day when we can bring our warriors home.” He added that America “cannot purge the world of evil or act everywhere there is tyranny. No amount of American blood or treasure can produce lasting peace and security in the Middle East.”

Early in the civil war, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had deployed to Syria, and its leader, Gen. Qassem Soleimani convinced Russian President Vladimir Putin that Assad could survive with help from Moscow and Tehran.

The US Congress developed bipartisan opposition to normalization with Assad's government, Adesnik told a Middle East Forum webinar on June 12. In 2019, Congress passed the Caesar Act, named for a photographer who documented systemic torture and killing in the Syrian regime's prisons. The legislation provided a list of possible sanctions against foreign enterprises doing business with Assad's government.

But sanctions “slowed to a trickle under President Joe Biden's administration. And those that were imposed were symbolic ... not economic,” said Adesnik, a Syrian and Iranian specialist. They “didn't increase [pressure on Assad](#).”

Too few cared

One reason was lack of a constituency calling on Congress for sanctions enforcement, he stressed. Another was “a limited number of people at the State Department and in the White House ... who don't think sanctions work” and believe “the United States can work something out with Assad.”

According to Adesnik, doubts about sanctions' effectiveness and a belief that Washington can "work something out with Assad" influences both Democratic and Republican administrations. The Trump White House "had several different policies" toward Syria before deciding "we were going to stand in the way of any normalization with Assad's regime."

Officials in the Biden administration "were looking for a way out" regarding Syria "but then came the war with Ukraine," Adesnik said.

With Russian and Iranian help, the Assad regime—which lost control of much of the country in the war's early years—held on against rebels backed at times by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the United States. Clinging to power, Assad and his loyalists became dependent on Tehran and Moscow. The desire for less tension if not better relations with the latter two capitals ultimately led Arab League members to bring Assad back, regardless of how that played in Washington.

The nature of Assad's survival was no secret. This June, the Netherlands and Canada filed a complaint against Syria with the United Nations' International Court of Justice. The two countries allege "the regime of Bashar al-Assad has tortured thousands of civilians, in violation of [a UN convention.](#)"

The Hague and Ottawa want the ICJ to order Damascus "to halt an alleged torture program during a long-running war." They say "there is ample evidence the regime has engaged in systemic gross human rights violations against its own people since 2011."

No matter. The Dutch and Canadian complaint came weeks after Assad's return to regional acceptance. In his *Wall Street Journal* commentary, Walter Russell Mead noted that "long-time American allies such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have flipped from backing the US-led effort to isolate and ultimately overthrow Assad to supporting the Sino-

Russian goal of reintegrating him into the regional order.”

Blowback

Assad’s reintegration progresses even though “he still controls only about 60 percent” of Syria “and about 50 percent of the population,” Adesnik said. “It’s been a Pyrrhic victory” elevating Russia and Iran in Syria. Tehran sees Damascus as part of the “axis of resistance” against Israel and the United States, he added. Russia seeks to leverage Assad’s regional reemergence to bolster its own position vis-à-vis Europe and eventually the United States.

Syria has facilitated Iranian attempts to trans-ship weapons, including precision missiles, to Hezbollah in Lebanon, Adesnik said. Hence the hundreds of airstrikes Israel continues to conduct on Syrian territory. Nevertheless, the IRGC, which supported the Assad regime, persists with attempts to establish bases in Syria close to Israel.

Washington Post columnist Josh Rogin critically summarized the import of Assad’s Arab League return in a May 31 commentary:

“When Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky spoke to the assembled leaders of the Arab League this month, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, newly restored to the organization, took off his translation headset and refused to listen. Assad’s mere presence in the hall shows that the Arab League is deaf to Ukraine’s pleas. Arab leaders have thrown in their lot with the Syrian butcher and his close ally [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#).

“The Biden administration publicly says it won’t normalize relations with Assad but no longer objects to Arab countries doing so. This is an abdication of 12 years of US commitments to hold Assad accountable for his mass atrocities. It is also a failure to implement US law requiring sanctions on those who aid the Syrian dictator. ... [U]nless somebody does something to hold Assad and his enablers accountable, their Syrian and

Ukrainian victims won't be the last."

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