

MIDDLE EAST

Return to the Arab League: How Syria's Readmission Affects Regional Stability

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The Arab League's decision to reinstate Syria after a nearly 12½-year suspension signals regional willingness to facilitate a collective Arab-led resolve to reconcile their differences and promote regional stability and cooperation. Engagement with Al-Assad can be viewed as a pragmatic decision to help bring an end to a crisis with few solutions. During an Arab League ministerial meeting leading up to the Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Faisal bin Farhan said the time has come for a united Arab front, affirming the bloc must "invent new ways to meet the challenges facing our countries."

Just before the Arab League Cairo Summit got underway, Egyptian foreign minister Samer Shoukry said that only an Arab-led "political solution without foreign dictates" can end the ongoing conflict in Syria and the protracted war that proved there remains no military solution to the Syrian crisis. Following the decision, the group released a joint statement reiterating similar sentiment. The Arab League Ministers expressed their eagerness to launch an Arab-driven initiative to address the Syrian crisis and agreed to form a committee comprised of ministers from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt, who would maintain communication with the Assad government "in order to reach a comprehensive solution."

The decision may have far-reaching consequences. Refugees could be potentially repatriated, the flow of humanitarian aid could be improved, and the reunion of Syria with its Middle East partners could help counter drug smuggling. These improvements will be contingent on Syria's willingness to move towards a political solution to its current crisis. The Arab League's re-acceptance of Syria – for now, a symbolic gesture, is only the start of "a very long and difficult

and challenging process,” as Jordan’s foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, said.

It has been estimated that nearly 500,000 Syrians were killed as a result of the brutal civil war, while half of Syria’s pre-war population – approximately 12 million people have been displaced since the conflict began. In addition to being ostracized by the international community, the Syrian government also currently faces a turbulent financial crisis and spiraling inflation. Today, nearly 90% of Syrians live below the poverty line and youth unemployment rates have hit 26%.

Egypt and Libya: Case studies of past suspensions

On November 12, 2011, 18 out of 22 members of the Arab League voted to suspend Syria in response to the Al-Assad government’s violent crackdown on anti-government protests earlier that year during the Arab Spring uprisings. The Arab League had called for an immediate cessation of violence, the release of political prisoners, the withdrawal of armed forces from cities, and the initiation of a political transition, and the suspension was both a condemnation of the government’s actions and a way to put pressure on the regime to end the violence and engage in political dialogue.

The decision to suspend Syria was significant because it marked a rare instance of collective action by Arab states against a member state due to its internal affairs. It also reflected the regional and international concern over the escalating violence and human rights abuses committed by the Syrian government against its own citizens. It is important to note, however, that Syria’s suspension from the Arab League did not amount to a formal expulsion. Syria was excluded from participating in Arab League meetings and activities until further notice, but efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis continued through various diplomatic initiatives and negotiations.

There have been other instances in the history of the Arab League, which was formed in 1945, where countries were expelled and later readmitted. One notable example is Egypt, which was suspended from the Arab League in 1979 following the signing of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, which led to the normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel. Egypt was readmitted to the Arab League in 1989 after the Arab League Summit in Casablanca, where a

majority of member states supported its readmission.

Another example is Libya, which was suspended from the Arab League in 2011 following the outbreak of the Libyan civil war and the intervention by international forces. Libya was readmitted in 2013, a year after the fall of the Muammar Gaddafi regime, with the recognition of the National Transitional Council as the legitimate representative of Libya.

These cases demonstrate that the Arab League is a dynamic organization that responds to regional developments and political shifts.

Jordanian Roadmap

Back in April in the lead-up to the Arab League's decision, Jordan hosted Syria's foreign minister, Faisal Mekdad along with the ministers of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to discuss Syria's readmittance into the organization as part of a larger political settlement to resolve Syria's internal conflicts. Jordan's proposed 'roadmap' for Syria includes a step-by-step reintegration process for Syria to engage with Arab states on a matter of issues to help resolve the crisis. While expectations from the Arab League remain low that Syria will implement holistic political reforms in line with UN Resolution 2254 – at a minimum for now, commitments were made to establish a gradual solution to Syria's current crisis by increasing dialogue between Arab leaders and Assad. For Syria's neighbors, the concern over a safe and voluntary return for refugees and displaced persons remains an immediate – and more obtainable goal. As is the dismantling of Syria's drug smuggling networks which morphed the country into a narco-state. While Jordan has attempted to take the diplomatic route by strengthening relations with Syria over the past few years to combat drug smuggling across its border, efforts have largely remained futile as illicit Captagon trade remains the primary financial resource for the Syrian regime.

Areas for Potential Progress and Policy Recommendations

Longstanding attempts to isolate Syria only served to worsen the country's social instability. It has been estimated that the war has resulted in nearly \$150 billion in physical damages alone, including critical infrastructure that has yet to be rebuilt, not to mention the countless hospitals, homes, and schools which were destroyed and never replaced. Such critical

reconstruction is essential for Syria's domestic stability.

Furthermore, Syria's return to the Arab fold has the potential to set conditions for the safe passage of refugees, increased movement of humanitarian assistance, and the opportunity to curtail illicit drug smuggling within the region.

The biggest benefit of the Arab League's move could be the voluntary return of refugees who have fled Syria, which would not only reunite families but also reduce the flow of refugees throughout the region and the world. That is assuming Al-Assad would abide by the humane treatment of displaced Syrians who wish to return home. While some refugees may be encouraged to return following Syria's re-admission to the Arab fold, others will remain hesitant unless their security is assured.

Cooperation between the Arab League and Syria might also lead to better coordination with international humanitarian organizations, which could facilitate improved access for aid agencies. This would mean the Syrian government allowing these NGOs to operate more effectively within the country by granting permissions and ensuring secure transportation routes. This would encourage joint initiatives, resource sharing, and more efficient distribution of assistance, particularly if the Arab League takes an active role in coordinating humanitarian efforts.

Enhanced regional cooperation and intelligence sharing among Arab League member states could also help address drug trafficking networks operating in the region. On the other hand, if Syria's political situation remains volatile or if the readmission leads to internal divisions, it may create an environment conducive to the continuation or even expansion of illicit activities, as political instability often leads to an increase in criminal networks.

Syria's return to the Arab fold could be viewed as a result of a precarious boycott that was unable to garner a political solution to Syria's civil unrest. The decision to readmit Syria back into the Arab League is viewed as a pragmatic conclusion by regional Arab leaders – not only for those who sympathize with Assad but also for those who have given up hope that substantial reforms can be addressed by the current Syrian government. Following the announcement of Syria's readmittance, Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit

said that Syria's membership "did not mean all Arab countries had individual normalized relations with Damascus" but rather it remains a sovereign decision for each member to decide whether or not to resume ties with Damascus. Nonetheless, most Arab states have accepted that after 12 years of a brutal civil war, a new approach is needed to address the crisis

Specific outcomes will depend on the conditions under which Syria is readmitted and the overall political and security situation in the country. Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad will need to exhibit a willingness to engage in constructive regional cooperation, respect the sovereignty of other Arab League member states, and refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries in the region.

Even then Syria's plight will depend on the regional security context, the effectiveness of border control measures, and the cooperation between relevant authorities. Other actors involved in the Syrian civil war, such as opposition groups, rebel factions, and external powers, will also factor into the readmission dynamics. Their stance on Assad's presidency and the potential readmission into the Arab League could impact the overall negotiations and political landscape.

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