



[Assad Returns to Saudi Arabia to Participate in the Arab League Summit](#)

Last week Friday, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad appeared at his first Arab League summit since Syria was suspended from the bloc of Arab states after his harsh crackdown on protestors in 2011 during the Arab Spring. Indications of Assad's return to the fold have long been visible, but these expectations did not blunt the outrage of his critics and opponents. Assad was warmly welcomed on his arrival by Saudi officials, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. This greeting is in stark contrast to just ten years ago when many Gulf monarchies were conspiring ways to oust Assad. Syria was officially brought back into the Arab League on May 7th after member countries agreed to lift the ban they implemented in March of 2011.

During the 2011 Arab Spring, a large wave of anti-government protests and uprisings took place across the Middle East and North Africa. One of the countries it took place was Syria against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, who has been in power since 2000. He succeeded his father Hafez al-Assad. When he first took power, the international community was cautiously optimistic as he released several hundred political prisoners and slightly loosened government restrictions on freedom of expression and press. This did not last long, as just a month later the Assad regime began using threats, violence, and arrests to put a stop to pro-reform activism. When the anti-government protests broke out in March of 2011, Assad's swift and brutal crackdown on protests, often using lethal force, drew criticism from the international community. There were multiple reports of massacres and indiscriminate violence against civilians, often dropping bombs on residential areas. This eventually led to their removal from the Arab League in May of the same year. Syria was further ostracized after its use of chemical weapons on civilians in 2013. This violent suppression led to an extremely bloody, drawn-out civil war which has led to the deaths of more than half a million people and displaced about half of the country's pre-war population.

The move to accept Syria back into the Arab League has drawn harsh international criticism and sparked protests in rebel-held parts of Syria and from the Syria diaspora around the world. Thousands of Syrians took part in demonstrations in the Syrian cities of Idlib, al-Bab, Azaz, Jarabulus, and Afrin. Demonstrations by the Syrian diaspora took place in Vienna, Amsterdam, London, Vaile, Stockholm, and Lyon. "We demonstrated today to remind those who are seeking to normalize their relations with the al-Assad regime that the Great Syrian Revolution started spontaneously as a response to the internal suffocation we endured under the Assad regime," said Ibrahim Aboud, a protestor in Idlib. Many of the protestors were profoundly distressed and frustrated by the lack of accountability for Assad's war crimes, which include the targeting of civilians and the use of chemical weapons. Despite this new normalization between Syria and other Arab countries, many of the protestors remained resolute in their goal. "Our message is crystal clear: Our revolution will continue until we achieve its goal and that's freedom and liberation from this regime." Says Jalal Talawi, a protestor from Al-Bab.

Syria joining the meeting was not unexpected, as many countries have been toying with the idea of allowing Syria to rejoin the Arab League. Four major factors contributed to Syria being welcomed back into the fold. First, Assad leveraged the recent earthquake in northern Syria and the subsequent need for

aid to accelerate his rapprochement with the bloc. Pleas for humanitarian aid gave him an avenue to quickly and easily reestablish connections with many members of the Arab League. The second factor is this move furthers Saudi Arabia's goal of projecting power and promoting a sense of stability. Saudi Arabia has been on a recent diplomatic campaign to normalize relations with its traditional adversaries, including Iran. This campaign is part of a larger effort to improve Saudi Arabia's image around the world and emerge as a candidate to fill the vacuum the United States left in the Middle East. The third factor is the acceptance that Assad is here to stay. He controls two-thirds of the country and the remaining rebel holdouts are weak. In essence, unless something dramatic happens soon, Assad has weathered the storm. There are no immediate threats to his reign, so as a practical point, it is not beneficial for the Arab League to continue to ostracize Assad. The final factor is Arab countries' desire to end or reduce the sale of Captagon, a highly addictive drug that Assad has been using to fund his country while he was a pariah. Likely, many members hope that allowing Syria to rejoin the league will reduce the country's need to fund itself through the sale of Captagon.

It should also be noted that not every member of the Arab League is fully on board with the return of Assad. Qatar, who has been a fierce critic of the Assad government since 2011 was hesitant to readmit Syria. During the summit, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani left immediately before Assad gave a speech to the bloc.

The Biden Administration's Syria policy suffered a big blow from the move to allow Syria back into the Arab League. It continues to maintain that it will continue to sanction Syria and may even pass stricter sanctions. This will have some effect on Syria's ability to reintegrate economically into the league but will have little political impact. America continues to lose its status as a player in the Middle East. The U.S. will continue to maintain its troop presence in northern Syria, but with Syria's readmittance, it is unclear if this will last.