

Syria's Return to Arab League Is a Big Deal

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When a mere subplot overnight assumes habitation and a name, it becomes more fascinating than the main plot itself. Syria's return to the Arab League after its decade-long exclusion can be regarded as a sub-plot of the China-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. But then, China and Iran are not per se party to the process.

Syria's return to the Arab League is seen as an Arab initiative, but it is quintessentially a project Riyadh steered through in close consultation and coordination with Damascus, ignoring some murmur by a clutch of Arab States and patently in defiance of Washington's trenchant opposition.

Against the backdrop of the epochal struggle for a new world order characterised by multipolarity and resistance to Western hegemony, Russia and China quietly encouraged Riyadh to move in such a direction.

A riveting thing about the decision taken by the foreign ministers of the seven Arab League nations at the meeting in Cairo on Sunday is its sweet timing. For, this is the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Ba'ath Party in Damascus in 1943, which espoused an ideology of Arab nationalist and anti-imperialist interests that have lately re-appeared in the geopolitics of West Asia.

Syria has a tradition of strategic autonomy. Through the past decade, it was preoccupied with fighting off the US-sponsored regime change project, with help from Russia and Iran. As it turns the corner and is stabilising, Syria's strategic autonomy will be increasingly in evidence. This is one thing.

However, the strategic relations with Russia and Iran will continue to remain special and there should be no misconceptions on that score. But Syria is capable of ingenuity and diplomatic acumen to create space for itself to manoeuvre, as geopolitics takes a back seat and Assad prioritises stabilisation and reconstruction of the economy, which requires regional cooperation.

The recent visit by Iran's president Ebrahim Raisi to Syria testifies to Tehran's "soft diplomacy," exuding pragmatism that on the one hand made it clear that despite the recent rapprochement between Damascus and Arab countries, Syrian-Iranian ties are still strong and even highlighted Syria's role in the resistance to Israel — with Raisi holding a meeting in Damascus with senior Palestinian officials, including leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad — while on the other hand, the negotiations with the Syrian leadership was largely about economic cooperation.

Raisi said Iran is ready to take an active part in the post-war reconstruction of Syria. Iran faces competition from Gulf countries that have deep pockets. Meanwhile, the warming of relations between Syria and Turkey is also on the agenda, which is sure to lead to increased trade and spur investment flow.

To put matters in perspective, Iran's exports to Syria currently amount to a paltry sum of \$243 million. However, since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Iran has been a key sponsor of the Syrian authorities. In January 2013, Tehran opened the first credit line of \$1 billion for Damascus, which was under international sanctions, thanks to which the government was able to pay for imported food. This was followed by a loan of \$3.6 billion for the purchase of petroleum products. The third loan of \$1 billion was extended in 2015. Tehran also allocated funds to Damascus to pay salaries to civil servants, which helped preserve state institutions. In 2012, a free trade agreement began to operate between the countries. Iran is also spending billions to finance Shiite militias in Syria and supply them with weapons. Naturally, Tehran would like to recoup some of these investments.

Syria is assessing, rightly so, that normalisation with the Arab neighbours and Turkey will be a game changer. But, while everyone is talking about Syria's "readmission to the Arab family" as a concession, Damascus reacted to the Arab League decision in a measured way.

The [Syrian Foreign Ministry statement](#) said on Sunday, "Syria has been following the positive trends and interactions that are currently taking place in the Arab region, and believes that these benefit all Arab countries and favour the stability, security and well-being of their peoples.

"Syria has received with interest the decision issued by the meeting of the Council of the League of Arab States." The statement went on to stress the importance of dialogue and joint action to confront the challenges facing the Arab countries. It recalled that Syria is a founding member of the Arab League and always had a strong position in favour of strengthening joint Arab action.

Most important, the statement concluded by reaffirming that the next stage requires "an effective and constructive Arab approach on the bilateral and collective levels on the basis of dialogue, mutual respect, and the common interests of the Arab nation."

From all appearance, the [Arab League statement](#) itself was a "consensus statement" drafted with great sensitivity by Saudi Arabia.

In an interview with Al-Mayadeen, Raisi said prior to his departure for Damascus that "Syria has always been on the axis of resistance... We unequivocally support all fronts of the axis of resistance, and my visit to Syria is within the framework of this support, and we are working to strengthen the resistance front, and we will not hesitate in this." In fact, Raisi's arrival in Syria coincided with increased Israeli attacks by Israel on Iranian military facilities,

including on Aleppo airport.

Without doubt, Iran remains Syria's main ally and Iranian influence in Damascus is still strong. Iran views Syria as its strategic territory through which Tehran can establish ties with Lebanon and confront Israel.

What works to Syria's advantage here is that the Saudi-Iranian detente is based on a common view in Riyadh and Tehran that they have to coexist in one form or another, since their enmity and regional rivalry turned out to be a "lose-lose" proposition that didn't improve their regional standing. Suffice to say, their national interest resulting from their rapprochement overrides past rivalries. Syria will be a testing ground where each other's true intentions as well as conduct will come under close scrutiny.

The good part is that the Saudis have concluded that President Assad is firmly in the saddle, having weathered the most devastating war since World War 2, and mending relations with Damascus can be a "win-win" for Riyadh.

That said, Syria is a strategic hinge where Riyadh will need to balance its strategic ties with the US and its tacit ties with Israel. But then, Saudi Arabia's new strategic calculus also includes China and Russia. When it comes to Syria, Russia is an anchor sheet for Assad, while China has been all along on the right side of history.

The Biden Administration is driven into frenzy by the winds of change sweeping the region — the conclusive death to the neocon agenda of Arab Spring in Syria; the groundswell of Arab nationalism and the growing resistance to western hegemony that create new requirements of pan-Arabism; the hidden charms of multipolarity; the rise of China; the existential crisis in Israel; the dialectics of tradition and modernity in the regional states amidst the aspirations of youthful societies and so on. Paradoxically, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Assad would have common interests today on many of these fronts.

Biden who is like a beached whale on West Asia's political landscape, has deputed his National Security Advisor [Jake Sullivan to rush to Saudi Arabia](#), holding the hands of his Indian and Emirati counterparts for company to save face and salvage the wreck of the US' regional strategies!

Wisdom lies in Washington using Saudis (and Emiratis and Indians) to open a line to Damascus. However, Assad will set the very same non-negotiable condition to Washington for normalisation that he insisted with Turkey — vacation of US occupation. Beyond that lies, of course, Israel's annexation of Golan Heights.

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Featured image: Emergency meeting of Arab League foreign ministers agreed to readmit Syria, Cairo, May 7, 2023 (Source: Indian Punchline)

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