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# The New Arab Approach to the Syrian Regime

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**Situation Estimation**

**STUDIES UNIT**

October 2018

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## Preface

With the outbreak of public protests in Syria, the Arab League issued a decision to suspend Syria's membership in the league during an urgent meeting held by Arab foreign ministers in November 2011. The meeting also called on Arab states to withdraw their ambassadors from Damascus to pressure the Syrian regime to implement the Arab initiative to stop the violence in Syria.

Several Arab states withdrew their ambassadors or closed their embassies in Damascus in February and March 2012 in conjunction with similar steps taken by other states particularly the United States and most of the European countries. Since then, public diplomatic communications have ceased between Damascus and its Arab counterparts with the exception of Oman, Algeria and Iraq. Also, Syria has not been represented in any official meeting of Arab states.

The fortuitous handshake- if we can say so- between Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, the Bahraini Foreign Minister, and Walid al-Muallim, the Syrian Foreign Minister, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York raises speculations of the existence of a Gulf-Arab rapprochement in the Syrian file especially as major Arabic media highlighted the event.

According to Al Khalifa, the handshake was not arranged, but the minister's warm welcome in front of the cameras, his subsequent statements regarding the necessity for Syrian soil to return to the control of the Syrian government and his emphasis that the meeting was not the first one with al-Muallim might indicate a role that Bahrain is playing given its special relationship with Saudi Arabia which led the Arab states move to boycott the regime in 2011-2012.

## Different Arab Positions towards the Syrian Regime

In 2011 and 2012, Arab states almost completely boycotted the Syrian regime whether by withdrawing their ambassadors from Damascus, closing their embassies or suspending the Syrian government's membership in the Arab League and in all Arab League subcommittees.

Several Arab states, in particular the states in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), became involved in the joint operation room supporting opposition factions. In some joint operation rooms, delegates from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey and some European states

participated. Also, most of the Arab states participated in the first Friends of Syria conference held in Tunisia and in the second held in Morocco.

On the other hand, four Arab states departed from the Arab consensus towards the Syrian regime, namely; Iraq, Lebanon, Oman and Algeria. These states have maintained normal or semi-normal relations with the regime and they rejected or made reservations on all decisions that sought to condemn the regime's human rights violations or decisions to overthrow the regime.

Lebanon and Iraq's relationships with the regime were limited to the public domain with their representatives voicing support for the regime stands in the Arab League and other forums. Neither Lebanese nor Iraqi officials have made official visits to Damascus since 2011. Ibrahim al-Jaafari's, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, visit to Damascus on October 14, 2018 constituted the first rupture in the case of Iraq whereas Oman and Algeria have sent and received delegations at ministerial level.

The remaining Arab states opted for mixed positions between those supporting the general Arab trend of boycotting the regime and those that opted for distancing themselves especially in recent years. After 2014, Egypt and Tunisia began releasing statements calling for the normalization of relations with Damascus, but these statements were not accompanied by concrete steps with the exception of the re-opening of the Tunisian consulate in Damascus in 2015. Re-opening the consulate represented an internally directed move related to political rivalry with the previous government rather than a regional diplomatic move.

It should be noted here that all the Arab countries, along with the rest of the world, maintained security relations with the Syrian regime, albeit to varying degrees, throughout the period of the crisis until the present. These relations in particular will witness the first indicators of rapprochement in the event the political regimes enter the stage of normalizing relations.

## **Changes in the Positions of Governments Supporting the Opposition**

The Bahraini Foreign Minister's handshake with his Syrian counterpart recalled the visit of the Bahraini King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa to Moscow in February 2016. During the visit Al Khalifa gifted Russian President Vladimir Putin a Syrian sword and insisted that the sword's name is 'the victory' wishing the Russian leader a "near victory".<sup>1</sup>

It is possible to say that Russian military intervention in Syria was a transitional point in the position of Arab states supporting the Syrian opposition. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Jordan and Riyadh to coordinate efforts in Syria and signed the de-escalation agreement of the southern front in Amman in 2017. Saudi Arabia also moved to establish a body formed of various Syrian opposition factions that would enter into direct negotiations with the Syrian regime. Here we are referring to the Syrian Negotiating Committee, the first version, formed in 2015 and the second version formed in 2017 after the Saudi King Salman bin Abdul Aziz's visit to Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

Saudi Arabia and Russia have special economic relations with the two countries managing what is described as the largest oil monopoly in history. This oil alliance has been particularly strengthened since 2016. Qatar also has privileged economic ties with Moscow as one of the world's largest natural gas exporters.

The majority of Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, committed themselves to the United States position when the American National Intelligence Agency decided to cut support for the armed opposition factions and to maintain Pentagon support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In August 2018, Saudi Arabia announced, for the first time officially, that it provided 100 million US Dollars to the areas of East Euphrates controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces. The decision was approved by the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Arab states that sided with the opposition for many years now focus, in their discourse, on the need to remove Iran from Syria without talking about Assad's departure or changing the Syrian regime. It appears that these countries are counting on reaching understandings and cooperating with Russia to achieve this demand instead of supporting the military factions to fight the Iranian presence in Syria.<sup>4</sup> Several events in the region significantly impacted the Arab position towards the Syrian crisis. The most prominent of these events was the Gulf crisis and the war in Yemen.

The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's statements to the American Times newspaper about al-Assad remaining in power, his expectation that al-Assad will not leave office soon, and his hope that al-Assad would not become an Iranian puppet are an expression of the Arab and especially Gulf states' approach to the Syrian file. An approach

represented in an Arab rehabilitation of the al-Assad regime in exchange for al-Assad abandoning Iran.

## The New Arab Rapprochement in Syria and its Limitations

Five countries - the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Kingdom - issued recommendations for a solution in Syria called “the paperwork”. The recommendations included completing the Geneva process through constitutional amendments, creating a secure environment to hold elections, the unity and independence of the Syrian territory, the reconstruction of infrastructure and creating the appropriate conditions for the return of the Syrian refugees, as well as the need to combat terrorism.

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In mid-September, the Russia Today channel leaked a draft version of the Declaration of Principles developed by the mini-group international group on Syria which was supposed to have been handed over by the five countries to the international envoy Steffan De Mistura.

According to the leaks, the objectives of the group are to build relations with a Syrian government that emerges from a political process in accordance with Security Council resolution 2254. This government must enjoy several conditions, the most important of which are: it does not sponsor terrorists, does not provide a safe environment for terrorists, is free of weapons of mass destruction, is committed to severing its ties with the Iranian regime and its military agents, does not threaten its neighbors, creates conditions for the voluntary and secure return of refugees and pursues war criminals and the perpetrators of crimes against humanity<sup>6</sup>.

The recommendations included in the “paperwork” issued in early 2018 and the leaked draft of the Declaration of Principles, did not address al-Assad's future, but rather settled for general terms. The draft declaration did appear more focused on the conditions that must be met by any Syrian government, especially “severing relations with Iran and its military agents” which it may be understood will be applied to the current regime if the declaration is adopted.

The new Arab approach stems from basic determinants the most notable of which is the approach’s harmony with the American vision outlined by James Jeffrey, the new envoy to Syria. The approach is based on advancing the political process in Syria through constitutional amendments and establishing ground for elections. In addition to the second determinant,

Arab states' rejection for the Iranian and Turkish role in Syria and the feeling among Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt that they lost their influence on the Syrian file in favor of Ankara and Tehran.

The Arab quartet (Saudi Arabia - Egypt - Bahrain - UAE) issued a statement last September on the sidelines of the meetings of the Council of the Arab League at the level of the foreign ministers, condemning what it described as the "Iranian and Turkish interference in the Syrian crisis". According to the statement, they considered that the interference has serious ramifications on the future of Syria, its security and sovereignty. In addition, that this intervention does not serve the efforts exerted so far to settle the situation in Syria<sup>7</sup>.

## Future Scenarios

### 1- The Regime's Response to the Arab Approach

In this scenario, the Syrian regime responds to the new Arab approach. The regime seeks to restore its full international legitimacy in the event that it responds to the offers presented to it by the USA and Israel through the gateway of the official Arab system. This response can be summarized by the regime abandoning Iranian influence in return for its continued rule, especially since the American vision expressed by James Jeffrey, the Special Envoy to Syria, is now very close to the Russian proposal for a solution in Syria. The American vision is based on constitutional amendments and laying ground work for elections under the auspices of the United Nations<sup>8</sup>.

In this scenario, the main challenge is the Syrian regime's ability to rid itself of the Iranian influence that is deeply entrenched in the military, economic and even political institutions. Tehran has the ability to exert various pressures on the regime in Syria to prevent it exchanging Iran for international legitimacy. In 2018, the regime is no longer a decision maker regardless of its desire to lead. The regime does not own anymore the decision making process in 2018 regardless of the desire of its leadership.

This scenario can be achieved if Russia uses its weight in Syria to limit the Iranian influence in parallel with the American sanctions on Iran that will begin in early November. Currently, Russian pressure on Tehran has no justification.

Realizing this scenario is also linked to the kind of gains that Saudi Arabia and other countries can provide the Syrian regime and Moscow at the same

time in order to push them to agree to the Arab offer. It appears that there is no real complete offer yet.

## 2- The Risk Adverseness of the Syrian Regime

The Syrian regime may prefer not to take risks and try out working with the Arab states to restore its official Arab and international legitimacy. It may prefer to keep relying on Iranian and Russian support for its continuity and imposing itself as a fait accompli, either because it does not want to undertake the experiment or because of its inability to do so because of Moscow and Tehran's influence on its decision. Bashar al-Assad has previously disclosed that he received several offers from Saudi Arabia which included disengaging from Iran in return for the normalization of official Arab relations with Syria. At the time, he emphasized that the issue is not open to bargaining<sup>9</sup>.

In this scenario, the regime hopes that the political stability that can be achieved through the Russian plan and the regional and international conditions, will lead Arab countries to normalize relations with the regime in the end, albeit at a slower pace than if it accepted the current Arab approach.

It is believed that in this scenario, Iraq and Lebanon will lead the process leading to the normalization of official ties with the Syrian regime, given the proximity of the governments of the two countries - or at least most of the government components - to the Iranian axis. The Iraqi Foreign Minister's visit to Damascus on October 14, 2018 is perhaps an inauguration for the two states' approaches towards the Syrian regime and aimed at breaking the Arab siege imposed on it. Algeria, Oman and possibly Egypt will follow Iraq and Lebanon allowing the rest of the Arab countries to take bolder steps in this regard.

## Conclusion

It seems that the ability of the Syrian regime to accept the normalization of relations with Arab states in exchange for disengaging from Iran is difficult to achieve in light of the extensive Iranian influence within Syrian institutions and Iran's influence reaching sensitive formations in the Syrian army such as the Fourth Division. Such a move remains unlikely also due to Russian control over decision making process in Syria.

On the other hand, the influence of the Arab position on the Syrian file is constantly declining in exchange for the growing role of Russia, Iran and Turkey. The only remaining margin for Arab states to maneuver in is to

work in coordination with Washington and in harmony with its position on the basis that Washington is the only actor able to make a difference. In this context, it is possible to understand the situation that brought together the Bahrain Foreign Minister and his Syrian counterpart in New York<sup>10</sup>.

It is believed that the Syrian regime will seek – with Russian and Iranian direction - to divide the files, so that it can gradually normalize relations with each state or axis separately, rather than deal with the Arab file overall.

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> King of Bahrain visit to Moscow and giving Putin a Damascene sword as present:

<https://goo.gl/yHhDqD>

<sup>2</sup> The complete text of the de-escalation agreement in southern Syria signed in Jordanian capital Amman: <https://goo.gl/Xi4y8U>

King Salman visit to Moscow: <https://goo.gl/Lb1y6R>

<sup>3</sup> Saudi Arabia announces support to SDF controlled regions with 100 million US Dollars: <https://goo.gl/Up1Avt>

<sup>4</sup> Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir during his visit to Moscow last August focused on foreign militias leaving from Syria and confronting Iran's behavior in the region without addressing the future of Assad: <https://goo.gl/3RxMbr>

<sup>5</sup> The content and recommendations of the five-states paper to solve the Syrian crisis:

<https://goo.gl/NgWeJz>

<sup>6</sup> The draft paper's details of declaring the principles of the five states:

<https://goo.gl/m4kvRL>

<sup>7</sup> The content of the statement of the Arab Quartet Committee released on 12 September, 2018: <https://goo.gl/q4wugY>

<sup>8</sup> United States special envoy to Syria talks about their new vision of a solution in Syria: <https://goo.gl/dKU7Mh>

<sup>9</sup> Bashar al-Assad statements regarding Saudi Arabia proposals:

<https://goo.gl/AWBFwP>

<sup>10</sup> Bahraini foreign minister press statements confirm the unity of their stand with the United States regarding the Iranian file: <https://goo.gl/DU27fY>