

REPORT

# THE RESTORATION OF SAUDI-SYRIA RELATIONS: GAINS AND CHALLENGES

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**RASANAHAH**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies

Among the significant developments in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Syria announced on March 23, 2023, that the two countries were in talks to resume consular services. This gained momentum to the point where an agreement on the resumption of diplomatic ties was reported after being severed for over a decade. Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, His Highness Prince Faisal bin Farhan welcomed Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad on an invitation to visit Saudi Arabia on April 12, 2023. In the joint statement issued by Saudi News Agency, the two sides agreed on the importance of resolving humanitarian issues, creating an environment that will allow aid to reach all areas of Syria, establishing the prerequisites for Syrian refugees to safely return to their homeland, taking the necessary measures to stabilize the situation throughout Syria's territories and to reach a political settlement as well as helping Syria to fight terrorism and foreign interference. This was an important step that was preceded by several indications of shifts in the Saudi position on Syria, most notably: the statement of the Saudi foreign minister during the Saudi-Chinese summit in December in which he expressed Riyadh's desire to find a way to initiate dialogue with the Syrian regime, the raising of the Syrian flag at the Arab-Chinese summit following the Saudi-Chinese summit, Saudi Arabia's humanitarian aid to Syria in the wake of the deadly earthquake in February 2023, and the talk about the possible inclusion of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the Arab League summit which Riyadh is hosting in May. This raises many questions about the factors that led to the Saudi-Syria rapprochement and the expected gains for both parties as well as the expected challenges or obstacles to the trajectory of future relations.

### **Favorable International and Regional Conditions**

The Saudi and Syrian moves occurred in tandem with significant shifts in the international and regional arenas. At the international level, the Russian war against Ukraine deflected global attention from the Middle East and mitigated the effects of polarizing policies that had repercussions on the region. As the United States is repositioning itself and directing its resources in accordance with its growing strategic rivalry with China and the militarization of Europe in

the face of the Russian threat, the region will likely witness a period of calm, undisturbed by the powerplay of international poles. However, due to the absence of the United States from the region, China has made a significant breakthrough with its successful mediation, paving the way for the resumption of Saudi-Iran relations. This propelled further understandings to be reached in other regional files, including the Syrian file. The Syrian earthquake highlighted the devastating impact of US and Western sanctions on Syria. The exemptions granted to Syria were a catalyst in the reconsideration of relations with the Syrian regime. Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine spurred the former to attempt to bring the views of the Syrian regime and regional powers that have reservations concerning it, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, closer together. The region, due to the economic repercussions of the coronavirus pandemic and the Russian war against Ukraine, is not ready to endure further conflicts and crises.

At the regional level, unresolved crises spanning over a decade have left the region with great challenges, and regional powers now perceive the conflicts as futile in which there will ultimately be no winners. This realization was reflected in radical foreign policy recalibrations by several regional countries, resulting in agreements and reconciliations that have contributed to the mitigation of tensions and the proxy wars raging on multiple fronts. In this context, one of the most prominent developments was the Gulf reconciliation, the Gulf-Turkish reconciliation, the Egyptian-Turkish reconciliation, and finally the Saudi-Iran agreement which represented the culmination of this new regional approach. This agreement was a significant turning point for preventing conflicts and disagreements in the region.

These recent détente agreements have impacted some regional crises, the most important of which is the Syrian crisis. Syria is witnessing diplomatic overtures from the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt and finally Saudi Arabia which is considering the resumption of ties and may open the way for the Syrian regime to return to the Arab League. This, of course, will not be realized without significant concessions that guarantee Saudi interests.

Following the Arab uprisings which swept across the region and the chaos that ensued, Saudi Arabia was compelled to assume regional responsibility, most importantly for defending regional security and stability, resulting in fundamental changes to its foreign policy. It ward off several threats against regional countries, including Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. As part of its aspiration for a stable and prosperous Middle East in line with its pioneering regional initiative for peace which is as important as the previous ones over the past years, Saudi Arabia aims to restore calm and end the conflicts plaguing the region. This will not only set the ground for regional stability, but also help Saudi Arabia to achieve its domestic vision within the context of a more prosperous and stable Middle East. Syria is important in the context of the aforementioned, especially after the Saudi-Iran agreement which aims to limit the polarization in Syria since 2011. The agreement provides an impetus to resume diplomatic ties with Damascus and creates a space for the resumption of dialogue between the countries. The restoration of relations with Damascus is in line with Riyadh's foreign policy vision of a more independent and stable Middle East. This is against the backdrop of Washington's announcement that it will not change its position on the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime.

The resumption of Saudi-Syrian relations was also preceded by a near-unanimous agreement on Syria's return to the Arab fold. The Saudi-Iran agreement spurred this consensus. Many regional initiatives were established to find solutions to the Syrian crisis, one example is the Jordanian initiative. These developments enabled the Syrian regime to restore its tattered legitimacy to some degree. It managed to reposition itself and improve its relations with some regional powers, including with some Gulf states such as the UAE and Oman which Assad visited, as well as with Turkey and Egypt with the help of Russia.

Saudi Arabia, based on its responsibility toward Arab issues by virtue of its leading position and in light of its Vision 2030, has developed the will to keep pace with shifts in regional attitudes toward the Assad regime. This was confirmed by the Saudi foreign minister's re-

marks at the Munich Security Conference on February 19, 2023. He said, “Consensus was building in the Arab world that isolating Syria was not working and that dialogue with Damascus was needed at some point to at least address humanitarian issues, including a return of refugees.”

The rapprochement with Syria gained further momentum as part of disaster diplomacy in the wake of the February 6 earthquake that hit Syria. Saudi Arabia provided aid to Syria via the Sahem (contribution) campaign despite the severed relations. Saudi aid in cooperation with the Syrian Red Crescent reached opposition-held areas as well as Aleppo International Airport and regime-controlled areas. This was an early indication of rapprochement with the Syrian regime.

### **Gains From the Restoration of Saudi-Syrian Diplomatic Relations**

By restoring diplomatic relations, the Saudi and Syrian sides aspire to achieve numerous internal and external gains and goals which can be summarized as follows:

#### **Gains for Saudi Arabia**

States strive to align their political moves with their national interests. Riyadh's rapprochement with Damascus is driven by its own priorities and the calculations of its short and long-term interests, including the following strategic interests:

##### *1. Reinforcing Saudi Arabia's Priorities and Short and Long-term Considerations*

The restoration of Saudi-Syrian diplomatic relations is an important gain for Saudi Arabia in its pursuit to reinforce its strategic position in the region and achieve its development projects by shifting from confrontation to resolving problems and removing diplomatic obstacles to directly address contentious issues.

##### *2. Realigning the Region Under Saudi Arabia's Leadership*

The moves to restore ties between Arab countries and Damascus have stepped up in recent years, culminating after the earthquake catastrophe in Syria and Turkey. The Saudi desire to restore relations

with Syria is the most crucial and prominent development due to the country's regional and international political status and weight through which it can lead the region and the world toward peace and stability.

### *3. Pressuring the United States*

Amid the shifts in the international balance of power and as Saudi Arabia became more aware of the US withdrawal from the region and the implications of the lack of regional security, the country realized that the restoration of relations with Syria will serve several considerations. These include changing the nature of Saudi Arabia's relations, diversifying its options and managing regional dynamics in a way that serves its strategic interests, even if this means diversifying partners and concluding agreements with US rivals. Therefore, the Saudi-Syrian rapprochement as well as the Saudi-Iran diplomatic agreement brokered by China are the outcomes of the declining US presence in the Middle East and Saudi diplomatic moves to realize its vision to ensure security and address strategic challenges in the region.

### *4. Combating Drug Smuggling and Armed Gangs*

The Syrian economy is hostage to captagon trafficking which is led by armed gangs that pose a threat to Syria's neighboring countries and the Gulf states. Hence, this concern prompted efforts to rehabilitate the Syrian regime to address this dangerous threat.

### **Gains for Syria**

The Syrian regime is working to secure important gains from its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, foremost of which are:

#### *1. Ending its International Isolation and Restoring Syria's Status Among Arab Countries*

The Syrian regime has been under isolation regionally and internationally. This isolation has diminished its ability to overcome internal crises, exert influence in the Arab environment and shield itself from external interferences. Therefore, breaking out of this isolation has always been a concern and incentive for Syria to restore its relations

with the international community and with regional institutions, including the Arab League. Many Arab countries severed relations with Damascus after its membership was suspended in the Arab League in 2012. Therefore, the Syrian regime is working to swiftly establish a comprehensive rapprochement with Saudi Arabia due to its influence and political weight so that the country can act as a bridge to bring Syria closer to the Arab sphere.

## *2. Improving the Economy and Obtaining Arab Support*

The return of Damascus to the Arab sphere and to the Arab League in particular represents a significant economic gain for the Syrian regime. This will allow for the restoration of economic and trade relations with Arab countries and the realization of financial revenues from transit and transport agreements. In addition to the dire economic situation amid international sanctions against the Syrian regime and its sponsors, Russia and Iran, the severance of Arab diplomatic and commercial relations is among the significant challenges facing the Syrian regime in recent years. The Syrian regime was recently forced to give public institutions and departments days off because it was unable to provide transportation and heating due to frequent power outages, leading to total economic paralysis in the country.

## **Gains for the Region**

### *1. Alleviating Tensions in the Region*

For over a decade, regional countries have been in disarray and domestic conflicts have made them more vulnerable to threats from non-state actors. Over the past years, non-traditional security threats such as organized crime, environmental threats, depleting resources, natural disasters and arms and drug trafficking have been increasing. This is in addition to continuous Israeli provocations and tensions and those of Iran and its proxy militias. Amid these escalating threats and a weakened regional security structure, the region will inevitably be dragged into a political and security quagmire. This is not in the interest of the region generally and Riyadh particularly, and their visions of ending the prolonged and costly wars which are de-

stabilizing and hampering the development of the region. Therefore, Arab rapprochement with Damascus, Tehran and Ankara reflects a significant gain to alleviate tensions in the region and shift it from contradictory alignments to embracing the logic of integration in the face of political and security challenges.

## *2. Benefits for Iran From the Restoration of Saudi-Syrian Relations*

Tehran is well aware of Syria's efforts to end its isolation and alleviate the impact of international sanctions. Thus, Tehran is unlikely to have any reservations or create obstacles in the face of the Syrian regime's foreign policy and orientations to improve the country's relations with Arab countries. In fact, alleviating tensions between regional capitals and Damascus could stabilize Tehran's gains in Syria. This new dynamic will help to bolster Iran's main regional partner in the long run and limit the tacit support for anti-Assad opposition groups, a significant mutual gain for Damascus and Tehran.

### **Obstacles That May Stand in the Way of Restoring Saudi-Syrian Relations**

In spite of the moves toward restoring Saudi-Syrian relations and the consequent gains for the two sides, a number of challenges may hamper a significant breakthrough in the restoration of relations. These challenges will likely play a prominent role in determining the form of Saudi-Syrian relations in the near-term, as follows:

#### **The Two Sides' Divergent Views on a Number of Regional Issues**

The divergence of views on regional issues deepened further after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the Syrian regime's alliance with the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran's strongest military arm and proxy in the region. Nonetheless, the outbreak of the Syrian crisis about 12 years ago led to fundamental disagreements. One of these disagreements is the position on the opposition in southern Syria; Saudi Arabia still adheres to its position on the opposition and the need for a satisfactory political solution acceptable to all parties as well as for the provision of humanitarian aid to all besieged areas. Saudi Arabia also calls on Syrian decision-makers to curb Iranian influence by dismantling or expelling pro-Iran armed



militias in the country and preventing further bases and outposts from being established, which are set up to increase Tehran's influence and secure more pressure cards to enable it to continuously tip the balance of power in its favor in the Syrian arena.

Saudi Arabia perceives Iran's spheres of influence in Syria as an obstacle to Arab and Gulf interests in Syria, Arab efforts to restore Syria to the Arab fold and any political settlement to the Syrian crisis. This is because a political settlement will help balance Syrian foreign relations. A unanimously accepted political solution after many years of conflict, especially in the form of a new Syrian equation, will fundamentally alter the nature and power of the Syrian state with strong institutions free of the influence of armed militias and will facilitate the resolution of the refugee and humanitarian crisis. Resolving the outstanding issues between Saudi Arabia and Syria in the Syrian arena or the Lebanese or Iraqi arenas depends on the ability of each party, especially Syria, to redraw its priorities, approaches and relations with its strategic allies. This recalibration will not be an easy task during the coming stage and requires time and trust between the two parties to continue dialogue and exchange information on cooperative and contentious issues. Both sides should demonstrate their willingness to overcome any hurdles in the normalization process and commit to a new political discourse. The Syrian regime should respect the decision of the International Tribunal on Rafik Hariri's assassination without reigniting tensions over the Lebanese file. Saudi Arabia and Syria should also reach an understanding on the means of controlling the internal situation in the Lebanese and Iraqi arenas, resolving crises and de-escalating conflicts. This will lead to both parties redefining their regional policies in line with Arab interests.

### **Russian-Iranian Leverage Over Syrian Decision-Making**

The dependence of Syrian decision-makers on Russia and Iran is one of the main obstacles to the restoration of Saudi-Syrian relations. The significant Russian and Iranian influence over Syrian decision-making is not only due to the great, pivotal and historical roles of the two countries in preventing the fall of the Syrian regime, but also because of their help to the Assad regime in restoring its control over Syria by

recapturing many cities, provinces and regions controlled by the opposition factions and terrorist and extremist groups. The Syrian regime currently controls 90 percent of Syrian territory, except for the opposition held Idlib and small parts of southern Syria.

### **Syria's Division Into Areas of Influence Between Several Influential Players**

The Syrian regime regained control over Syria since recapturing Aleppo in 2017, shifting the balance of power decisively in its favor. Despite this, the Syrian arena on the ground is divided into several areas of influence between international, regional and internal players.

Some areas are under Russia's control within what is known as "Useful Syria." These areas are of great strategic value not only because of their location on the coastal strip and along the border regions but also because of their abundance of resources such as phosphate and gas. These Russian-controlled areas include parts of Damascus and its countryside, Homs, Latakia and Tartus. Some areas are under Iran's control, with broad swathes also located within "Useful Syria." This helps to explain the Russian-Iranian disagreement over areas of influence in Syria before their cooperation in the Russia-Ukraine war. Some areas in northern Syria are under Turkish control while other areas remain under the control of the Syrian regime. In addition, parts of Idlib continue to be controlled by the Syrian opposition. This is along with safe areas and no-fly zones, making any Saudi-Syrian cooperation difficult to achieve on the ground.

### **US Sanctions on Syria**

Sanctions represent the most serious obstacle to advancing Saudi-Syrian relations, especially in the economic and trade fields. Washington firmly opposes the normalization of relations with the Syrian regime and justifies this by pointing to the absence of real and lasting progress with regard to a [political solution](#) in line with Security Council Resolution 2254, a US draft resolution adopted in December 2015. The resolution provides for allowing humanitarian assistance to reach the besieged areas, the establishment of a transitional government and the holding of free elections under UN supervision.

Washington also justifies its rejectionist position on the normalization with Damascus since it has not responded to international calls for releasing political prisoners, allowing the safe return of refugees, prosecuting the perpetrators of war crimes in Syria and bringing those responsible to justice.

Washington imposed sanctions on Syria under the Caesar Act, which former US President Donald Trump signed into law on December 20, 2020, for five years after the date of enactment. It provides for the imposition of sanctions on any government, company or individual that directly or indirectly deals with the Syrian regime. The act also enables the United States to impose sanctions on any government, firm or individual that deals with the Syrian regime in four vital sectors: energy, aviation, finance, banking and construction and engineering. Hence, this act thwarts Saudi cooperation with Syria on economic, trade and reconstruction projects.

### **Conclusion**

Arab and regional moves toward Syria indicate an imminent breakthrough in the Syrian crisis which has lasted for well over 12 years. Among these Arab overtures, Saudi Arabia's orientation toward improving its relations with Syria is based on its leading role in resolving regional issues and crises, bridging the Arab rift, and protecting the Gulf states from security threats posed by drug trafficking and armed militias.

The restoration of Saudi-Iranian relations will benefit the countries of the region as a whole, especially Syria which seeks Saudi Arabia's assistance in restoring it to the Arab fold. This rapprochement will also prevent the fragmentation of Syria and will help in addressing the deteriorating humanitarian and economic conditions which the country has been enduring since 2011.



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✉ [info@rasanahiiis.com](mailto:info@rasanahiiis.com)

🐦 📺 📺 @rasanahiiis

🌐 [www.rasanah-iiis.org](http://www.rasanah-iiis.org)

