

What ‘Normalization’ With Syria Really Means

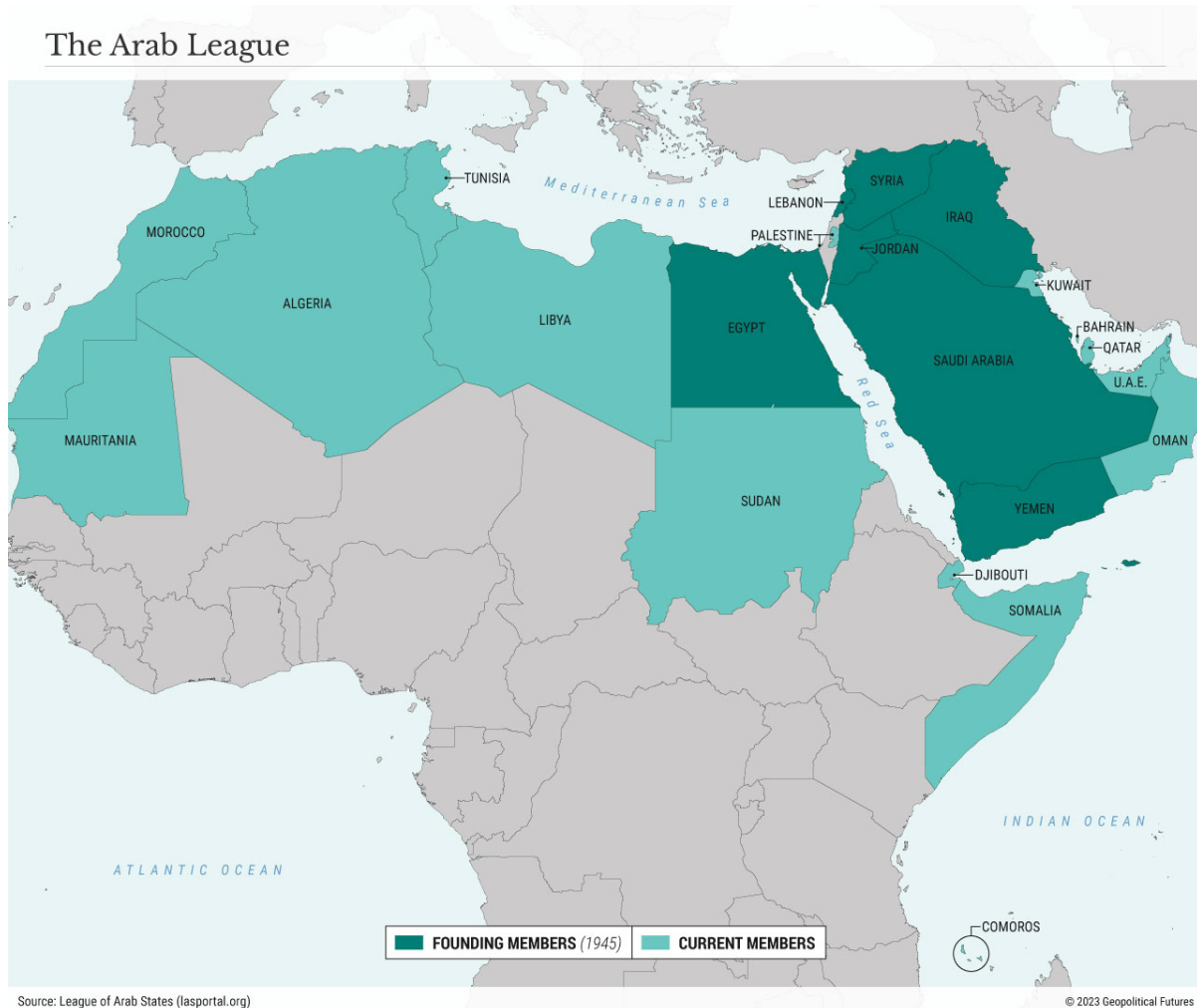
by Caroline D. Rose - June 27, 2023

A growing list of Middle Eastern governments has announced a reset of relations with Syria following more than 12 years of civil war in the country and fruitless regional efforts to isolate President Bashar Assad's regime. Almost overnight, neighboring countries that initially supported the Syrian opposition, cut ties with Damascus, denounced the regime's mass atrocities and human rights abuses, and imposed punitive economic measures last month started rolling out the red carpet for Assad, his family and high-level Syrian officials. Since then, Damascus and regional governments have held a string of high-profile meetings and forged several preliminary agreements. The Arab League formally readmitted Syria, and Assad's regime launched bilateral working groups with neighbors like Iraq and Jordan to collaborate on issues such as counternarcotics and border security.

Regional officials have presented these initiatives as an effort to achieve normalization with the Syrian regime. However, it is unclear what a political, diplomatic and economic reset with Damascus would really look like. And when the Assad regime seeks to preserve the status quo, whose version of “normal” will win out?

A Reset?

In recent years, several Middle Eastern countries have toyed with the idea of normalization with Syria to bring the country's civil war (and the accompanying regional disruptions) to a close. The United Arab Emirates supercharged this approach starting in 2015, becoming one of the first regional neighbors to bring high-level Syrian officials – including Assad himself – to the table for discussions on an agenda to bring Syria back into the regional fold. Egyptian officials tossed around the idea of allowing Syria to rejoin the Arab League. Countries like Jordan were more cautious but were still keen to keep communication channels open and test the regime's responses. For example, Jordan reopened the Jaber-Nassim border crossing and invited Syrian diplomats to Amman for discussions.



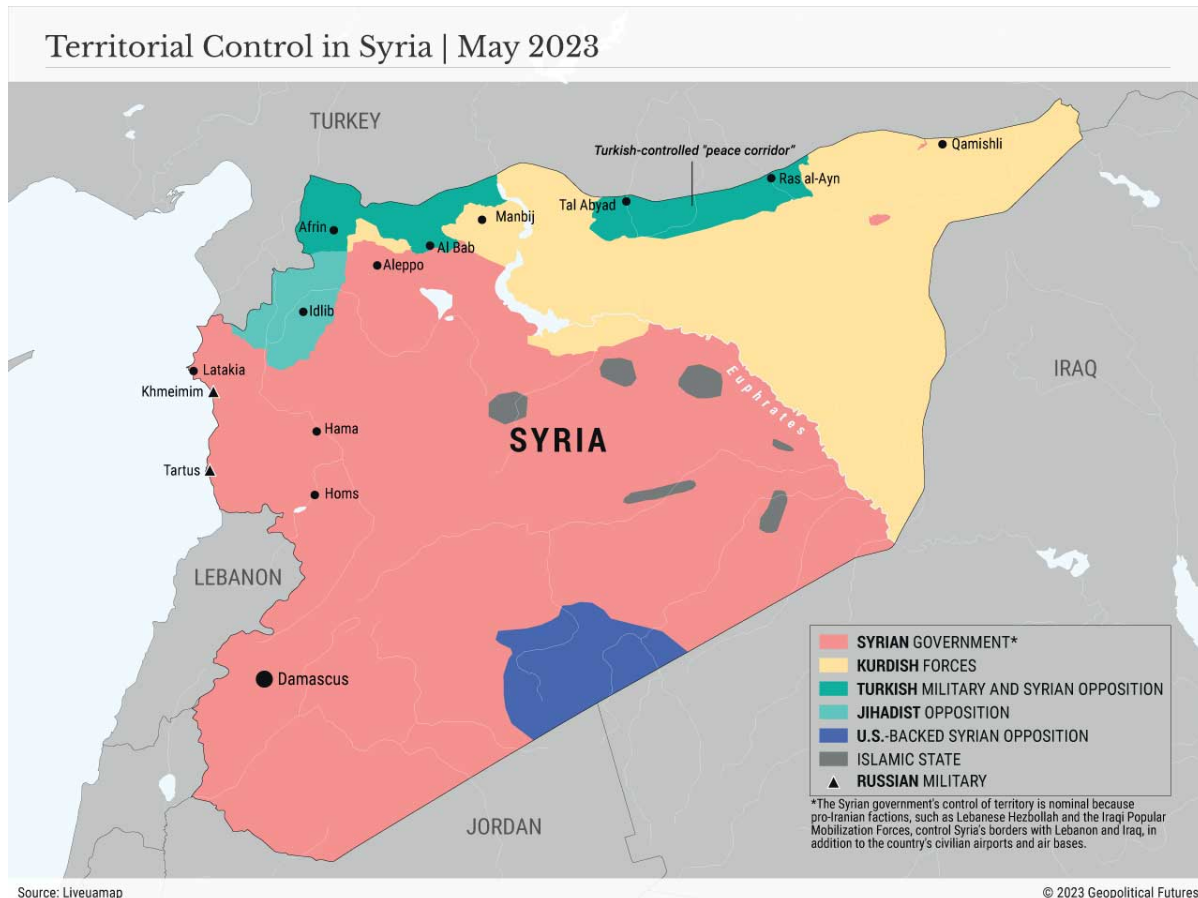
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These efforts gained momentum after a catastrophic earthquake struck northern Syria and southern Turkey in February. The tragedy provided a justification for many countries considering normalization to open direct communication with Damascus to coordinate humanitarian policies and provide immediate aid to Syrians through regime-held territories and aid channels. Since then, countries have set their sights on full normalization – reopening embassies, appointing ambassadors to Damascus, and exploring ways to coordinate with Syria on border security, trade, climate change and other issues of shared interest. Many regional players believe that engagement on peripheral issues could induce a genuine change in the Syrian regime’s behavior and potentially its position on a number of substantial, more controversial issues related to Syria’s civil war: the safe return of refugees, counterterrorism against Islamic State, Iranian and Russian presence in Syria, and an inclusive political settlement that could chip away at some of the Assad family’s hold on power and

bring about a more comprehensive political system that represents more of the country's ethnic and political groups. Yet it is difficult to imagine a path forward when it's clear that the regime's maximalist position largely remains unchanged.

What the Syrian Regime Wants

The key variable in the future of Syria is the fate of the Assad family. The Assads ascended to power in the 1970s with the rise of Baathism, and they solidified their grip on the country through the creation of a vast patronage system. However, Syria's history of sectarian rivalries, competing tribes and complex patronage networks are a constant threat to the Assad family's continued rule. Despite the family's survival through more than a decade of civil conflict – weathering foreign-backed opposition and recovering nearly 70 percent of the territory lost earlier in the war – the Assads still feel the fragility of their position. Rigged national elections, repeated purges of close allies (including some blood relatives) and frequent arrests of perceived opponents have helped the Assads maintain their position and create a narrative of legitimacy and invincibility among skeptical Syrians in regime-held territories.



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This, in turn, has bled into Syria's foreign policy and its engagements with its neighbors. While the Syrian regime has always wanted its regional counterparts to lift economic restrictions and end its diplomatic isolation, it refuses to offer – or even appear to offer – any sort of concession that might undermine its political credibility. The Syrian regime's vision of normalization is vastly different from that of its neighbors. For Syria, normalization will uphold the status quo inside the country – the exclusion of the opposition from substantive governance initiatives, maintaining the regime's hold over a majority of the country (and empowering it to consolidate additional territories), and keeping the reins of political power in the hands of the Assad family, all while reaping the benefits of renewed commercial ties and foreign investment from neighbors that will provide relief from the country's economic crisis.

Though Middle Eastern countries are optimistic about achieving normalization with Syria, it is more likely that they will have to accept Assad's maximalist vision. With such disparate incentives among countries in the region, they cannot simply hit the reset button and transport bilateral relations with Syria back to 2011, before the war began.

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