

# ARAB LEAGUE NORMALISES TIES WITH ASSAD'S SYRIA

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For Washington, which has tried to oust President

Assad since 2011, the development constitutes yet another foreign policy failure in the region.

**Category:** [NEWS](#)

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After a 12-year suspension, the Arab League, a key regional organization numbering 22 countries, is bringing Syria back into the fold. The decision came last weekend [during a meeting](#) at the organization's headquarters in Cairo.

The move, made by the member states' foreign ministers and much decried by Washington, will normalize relations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Effective immediately, the decision comes nearly two weeks before the Arab League holds its annual summit on May 19th. Assad will be allowed to participate, which will mark the return of the war-torn country's leader after a 12-year absence.

While Syria's readmittance had been mulled for a while, in the wake of the [devastating earthquake](#) which hit Turkey and northern Syria, the idea quickly gained traction as the League, founded in 1945, was meant to improve coordination on matters of common interest.

According to a copy of the decision seen by Reuters, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt—with the Arab League's Secretary General—are to form a ministerial group to liaise with the Syrian government and seek solutions to rebuilding the country and providing it with aid.

Qatar, while an Arab League member state, did not attend Sunday's Cairo meeting, as its position on Syria had not changed.

Yet, with Syria largely under his control, and with substantial political backing, Assad is firmly back in the saddle.

In 2011, Syria was expelled from the Arab League following a violent uprising against the Assad government, which he tried to suppress. This turned into a protracted civil war which, with Syria's readmittance into the Arab League, has de facto come to an end.

Now that Assad has the political backing of most Arab nations, he could potentially play the ethno-nationalist card, and accuse the U.S. of illegally occupying Arab lands, since it maintains a military presence in the country's east, having seized [three-quarters of its oil and gas reserves](#) there.

To the north, the Turks also occupy territory as part of their fight against Kurdish militants, who hold territory to the northeast.

During the conflict, several fellow Arab League members turned against Syria, supporting various militant factions through arms or money, while severing diplomatic ties with Syria. As a result, president Bashar al-Assad became persona non grata.

While Assad enjoyed the support of Iran, Russia, and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah which helped him cling to power, Syrian rebel groups received political, logistic, and military support from the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UK, France, Israel, and the Netherlands, turning what was a civil war into a proxy conflict.

In the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, leading to the ouster of President Saddam Hussein, a political vacuum was created, which Iran (a regional U.S. adversary) was ready to fill.

Through its de facto alliance with Syria, Iran was in a position to project its influence across the Middle East, a scenario that the U.S. wanted to avoid. To isolate Iran, the U.S. sought to break that alliance. The U.S., therefore, tried to effect regime change in Syria by

supporting anti-government groups within the country while placing it under heavy economic sanctions.

Under the classified [Timber Sycamore](#) program (2012-2017), the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency supplied money, weaponry, and training to Syrian opposition militias of the Free Syrian Army, training thousands of rebels.

In secret, then-President Barack Obama had authorized the CIA to begin arming rebel forces, when in mid-2016, the program came to the public's attention and was soon shut down.

As reported by writer Carlos Perona, the region is undergoing a [historic realignment](#), extricating itself from Western influence, while countries with traditionally strong ties to the U.S. (Saudi Arabia in particular) are entering into rapprochement with Syria.

The move did not come as a total surprise. Last month, Saudi Arabia—through China's mediation—[restored ties with Iran](#), its erstwhile adversary and a key ally of Syria. That same month, the Saudi Foreign Minister visited President Assad [for the first time in over a decade](#), after which Saudi Arabia's embassy in Damascus was reopened.

For Washington, the latest development constitutes yet another foreign policy failure in a region where its influence is waning while Russia's and China's are on the rise. During a May 8th press briefing, a U.S. State Department spokesperson [said](#) that while Washington shared the goals of its Arab partners in Syria, including building security and stability, it did "not believe Syria merits readmission to the Arab League at this time," adding that the U.S. would not normalize its relations with the "Assad regime" and does not support its allies and partners doing so either.