



Fabrice
Balanche

Syria's return to the Arab League: 'The earthquake accelerated the rehabilitation process'

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Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, guest of the next Arab League summit scheduled for May 19 in Saudi Arabia. Something unthinkable a few months ago.

The participation of the Syrian president consecrates his return among his Arab peers after more than eleven years of isolation. This invitation comes after the reintegration, Sunday, May 7, of Syria within the Arab League, from which it had been excluded in 2011 following the popular uprising which degenerated into civil war.

To understand the stakes of this turnaround, what is being played out in the region and the reasons behind this rapprochement with Syria, France 24 interviewed Fabrice Balanche, Lyon University, specialist in geopolitics of the Middle East.

France 24: How important is the reintegration of Syria into the Arab League ? What can this decision change diplomatically for Bashar al-Assad ?

Fabrice Balanche: It is above all symbolic because the Arab League does not have exceptional decision-making power. The reinstatement removes any obstacles to the reopening of Arab embassies in Damascus and Syrian embassies in Arab League countries. Even if the final decision and the timing rests with each of the Member States and in this area, there are disparities. The United Arab Emirates had already relocated its embassy in 2018, Saudi Arabia has just announced that it will open its diplomatic mission in Syria. This should not take long for Egypt, Sudan, Bahrain, and Tunisia. But Qatar [qui a soutenu les rebelles syriens] should take its time.

In any case, for Bashar al-Assad it is a great diplomatic victory, with Syria regaining its place within the Arab world, which will facilitate official meetings. This is important because politics in the Arab world is very much about personal relationships. The key is the question of participation in the reconstruction of Syria.

But de facto, this also leads to the burial of the Syrian opposition, even though it had occupied the seat of Syria, during the Arab League conference in Doha in 2013. With this decision of the League, it finds himself marginalised. It is for this reason that the Syrian opponents are all up in arms against this reintegration. Without forgetting that it is also a matter of money because they have benefited so far from a financial windfall from the Gulf countries, which will no longer be the case.

This decision also comes against the backdrop of reconciliation between Saudi



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Arabia and Iran. Does this explain this reversal of the Arab League with Syria?

Saudi Arabia initiated Syria's reintegration into the Arab League, with the support of the United Arab Emirates, and the other Arab League countries complied. Riyadh's recent rapprochement with Tehran under the aegis of China explains this decision.

If the Saudis have decided that, it is to make a gesture towards Iran – an ally of Damascus. Behind the scenes the deal is as follows: on the one hand, it's about leaving the field open to the Iranians in Syria by stopping supporting the Syrian opposition. And on the other side, Iran promises to calm things down with Yemen and that the Houthis [alliés chiites des Iraniens] stop firing missiles at Saudi Arabia. The Saudis needed this rediscovered security in their kingdom in order to offer the ideal conditions for the economic investments desired by [le prince héritier] Mohammad Bin Salman [homme fort de Riyad].

There is also another unsaid. The problem of captagon is of particular concern to Arab countries. In a few years, Syria has become a narco state. It is estimated between 5 and 10 billion dollars in the production of this synthetic drug which gangrene youth and is sold throughout the Arab world, especially in the Gulf countries with high purchasing power. To fight against this traffic it is necessary to attack the production. And we suspect that Bashar al-Assad and the barons of the regime are behind this production. To stop this traffic, you have to provide them with another activity. The reconstruction of Syria and the investment of Gulf countries in Bashar al-Assad's real estate projects aim to stop, or at least reduce, the production of this drug.

Did Bashar al-Assad take advantage of the earthquake that devastated northern Syria to become accessible again? ?

The process of rapprochement with Damascus was already underway, with the United Arab Emirates in the lead. But the earthquake has highlighted the catastrophic situation of the Syrian people under international sanctions and the state of the country's reconstruction, which is not moving forward. He raised the question of the usefulness of the sanctions which strike the Syrian people and do not prevent Bashar al-Assad from remaining in power.

The European Union and the United States have suspended their financial sanctions against Syria for several months and it is renewable. These sanctions blocked the humanitarian action of many NGOs and the reconstruction by slowing down entrepreneurs who wanted to reinvest in Syria. It is hard to see how they are going to restore them in view of the humanitarian context which is not going to improve.



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On the pretext of the earthquake, the Arab countries began to discuss again with the Syrian officials without losing face. It can be said that this disaster has accelerated the process of rehabilitation of Syria within the Arab League.

For the first time since 2011, the foreign ministers of Turkey and Syria met on May 10 in Moscow. Is Bashar al-Assad able to rebuild his relations with other countries ?

The process of rapprochement with Turkey is taking place in parallel and under the aegis of Russia, which has been working since the start of the war in Ukraine to achieve a rapprochement with Erdogan.

As for the West, for the United States, Syria is no longer so much on their agenda. Europeans feel concerned by the events in Syria because migration from this country has a direct impact, as does the terrorist problem. As a reminder, there are still several hundred European jihadists at large in the country with a new generation of jihadists appearing in the north-east.

Despite everything, the EU does not want to normalise its relationship with Bashar al-Assad for reasons related to human rights and war crimes. But we still see European countries which are on the front line of the migratory wave and which wish to reconnect with Syria in a purely realistic approach, like Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania or even Cyprus. Denmark is also campaigning for normalisation with significant gestures. The Danish Migration Office thus estimated, in 2020, that the situation in Damascus was "sufficiently stable" to allow the return of Syrian refugees.