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The Next Chapter in the Syrian Conflict: The Road to Normalisation



Nour Samaha is a Visiting Fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations and a freelance journalist and analyst based between London and Beirut. She has been covering the region for over a decade, with a specific focus on Syria, Lebanon and Israel-Palestine. She has produced in-depth reports and investigations from the ground for publications including The Intercept, The Century Foundation, Al Monitor, Al Jazeera, Foreign Policy and The Atlantic.

There has been a flurry of activity in the Syrian arena over the last few weeks. Developments seem to be spelling out a new phase for Syria, as well as for regional and international actors. One should expect the next few weeks to reveal further developments that will contribute to a pronounced reshaping of relations and the regional order.

By the end of 2018, the Syrian government and its allies managed – through a mixture of military offensives, political negotiations and ‘local reconciliations’ – to recapture large swathes of territory that had previously been held by the Syrian opposition or ISIS. Today, all that remains outside government control are the northern province of Idlib (controlled by Turkey, its local Syrian affiliates, and HTS) and the north-east of the country (under the control of the Kurdish-dominated SDF-YPG).

Meanwhile Syria has received a stream of official visitors from Arab states: from a Jordanian parliamentary delegation, which spent five days on an official visit to Damascus, to Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, the first presidential Arab leader to visit Syria in eight years, to Ali al Shamsi, the deputy head of Emirati intelligence.

As a result, the Nassib border-crossing between Syria and Jordan has opened for trade, the UAE has re-opened its embassy in Damascus, and both Bahrain and Kuwait have signalled they intend to do the same very soon. Iraq has also indicated it plans on bolstering trade with Syria and reactivating the Iraqi-Syrian Committee for Mutual Cooperation. In neighbouring Lebanon, which is still very divided politically on how to deal with Syria, several predominantly pro-Damascus political factions are pushing hard for strengthening relations between the two countries.

For each of these Arab states, relations with the Syrian government, after eight years of war, are today necessary for their own survival amid shifts in the regional balance of power. These include but are not limited to: a diminishing U.S. role, a greater Russian role, an emerging Turkish role, a greater Iranian presence, and a growing partnership between Gulf states and Israel. In effect Arab states are looking to Damascus to contribute to their survival strategies, and this has inadvertently given Syria a negotiating advantage.

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For Jordan, re-establishing relations and opening a trade route with Syria alleviates some of the pressure from its mounting economic crisis and growing popular unrest, while allowing it to get ahead of other states when it comes to reconstruction – Damascus has already signalled favourable terms for Jordanian businessmen and contractors. In the emerging regional order, Jordan cannot afford to have a hostile government on its border, especially one that can provide such a fruitful economic lifeline.

While Iran's perceived expansion in the region is often cited as the biggest threat to Gulf states, today these states – especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE - followed closely by Egypt and Jordan, are more concerned about the growing role (and therefore threat) of the Muslim Brotherhood in the forms of Turkey and Qatar, and about their potential influence in a new regional order. While the Gulf perceives Iran to be a threat, it also knows that a Shi'a-majority state cannot influence a Sunni-dominated region in the same way that Sunni states like Turkey and Qatar can.

Today, Turkey (ergo the Muslim Brotherhood) is positioning itself as the leader of Sunnis – a direct challenge to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The Gulf sees a reestablishment of relations with Syria and welcoming it back into the 'Arab fold' as a way of buffering this threat, as well as limiting Iran's role in Syria. While Saudi Arabia has yet to shift overtly on Syria as other Gulf states have, it will likely do so this year – once it figures out what to do with the Riyadh-based Syrian opposition group. Add to which, if there is a Syrian-shaped cake to divide in the post-conflict phase, the Gulf feels it should have access to some of the slices.

While Iraq has never officially cut off relations with Syria and has over the years worked closely with the Syrian army in the fight against ISIS, a bolstering of relations at this point allows Baghdad to elicit favourable trade and economic deals and reduce reliance on Iran to stabilise its economy.

Lebanon, as usual, is a little more complicated. Since Syria shares almost 90 percent of Lebanon's border, Lebanon's agricultural trade with the Gulf, via Syria and Jordan, suffered greatly when the Jordanian-Syrian border closed. An argument made by pro-Damascus factions is that Lebanon, also suffering one of its worst economic crises in recent history, needs favourable relations with the Syrian government for the full re-establishment of trade with the Gulf – as well as access to the Syrian reconstruction pie.

However, the only issue on which all Lebanese political factions can agree is the return of Syrian refugees to Syria (there is a very real concern the UN intends to keep them in Lebanon permanently). The debate is whether that should be done through direct contact with the Syrian government or through intermediaries, such as Russia and Hezbollah. With the (eventual) formation of a new government and an eye on shifts in the region, Lebanon is likely to open up more to Syria, but it will be on Damascus' terms rather than Lebanon's, as the relief Syria can offer Lebanon is far greater than what Lebanon can offer Syria.

The US announcement that it intends to withdraw from Kurdish-controlled north-eastern Syria has forced the Kurds to face reality: Its primary partner is unreliable and unpredictable, and its only viable option is to turn back to Damascus. While there have been ongoing talks with Damascus for a while now, America's announcement has deprived the Kurds of negotiating cards, instead providing Damascus with the opportunity to dictate terms – as annihilation by Turkey now looks like a potential alternative to Syrian government control.

Having said that, negotiations between the parties involved in the area have yet to yield tangible results, largely due to the fact that the demands being made by Damascus have been unacceptable to the current YPG leadership. Meanwhile, Turkey has stated its readiness to launch military operations in the area. These are likely to start, if at all, with Manbij, to create a Kurdish-free buffer zone. Over the next few weeks, if talks between the Syrian government and the Kurds continue to stall, one option currently being floated would be to allow a Damascus-friendly Arab force (possibly Emirati) to maintain a presence in the area. This option would be likely to deter a Turkish invasion; it would allow both Damascus and the Kurds more time to thrash out an agreement; and it would provide a Gulf state with a role in post-conflict Syria. It would also prevent Iranian-backed militias (currently in Deir Ezzor and its surroundings) from expanding into the vacuum left by the Americans.

In the long term what is likely is the eventual return of government forces to the area, and a government takeover of all border crossings, in return for which Damascus will bestow upon the Kurds their language and cultural rights, as well as a level of local administration that was already present under the pre-war Syrian constitution. Damascus is pushing for, and Ankara would accept, a Syrian government takeover that would translate into a 'dilution' of the YPG by placing more Arabs (from the area) within high-level ranks.

So, as 2019 starts, several former adversaries are pivoting back towards Syria – with little, if any, cost to Damascus – and the Syrian government sees itself as a victor. The EU and United States still reject any notion of normalisation, and the latter is pushing to increase sanctions on Syria. But eventually, Damascus believes, they too will come to the table, as their regional allies have done. And the longer they hold back, the less opportunity they will have to dictate terms.

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+44 (0) 7950 944 010

tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

www.ambassadorllp.com