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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Syria will return to the family of Arab allies, but at what cost?

Syria is on its way to being readmitted to its Arab family from which it was suspended more than a decade ago, but with far more caution and mutual trade than celebratory fanfare.

The Arab summit on May 19 in Saudi Arabia will represent Syria's possible return to the 22-member bloc.

The formal return after the long-term suspension is not yet definite due to the opposition of some AL members, but diplomacy on the actual thawing of relations between the Arab partners and Syria is well underway.

The question is no longer whether Syria will be reintegrated into the family from which it was excluded, but only when it will happen.

Saudi Arabia has been leading the "pardoning" of Syria on the wave of its major diplomatic interventions in the region, particularly the recent thawing of relations with Iran.

Saudi Arabia is lobbyiing other Arab partners intensively to enable the return of Syria to the club, stressing that it is in the interest of everyone in the bloc when it comes to security in the region.

Riyadh's efforts were joined by Egypt, another heavyweight of the Arab League, which has not had political communication with Damascus for years until the beginning of this month, when the head of the Syrian diplomacy, Faisal Mekdad, visited Cairo.

Tough road ahead of Syria

However, the reintegration of Syria into the Arab League will not go smoothly and without obstacles, and it is more realistic that it will happen step by step, rather than all at once.

This was clear two weeks ago when the ministers and leading officials of 9 Arab nations - from the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq - met in Jeddah. The topic was precisely the normalisation of relations with Syria and its possible return to AL.

Apart from the common position that this regional forum will continue to search for a political solution to the Syrian conflict, there was no consensus about opening the door to Syria's return to the Arab League.

"The Syrian people are still displaced; innocent people are in prison", said the Qatari Prime Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman, one of the opponents of Syria's reintegration into the Arab League after the meeting.

Qatar also emphasised that it will not take any steps towards approaching Damascus and Bashar al-Assad until a political solution to the conflict in Syria, which has been ongoing for 12 years and has claimed half a million victims and driven half of the population into exile, is reached.

Therefore, it will not be easy for the Arab partners to achieve unity regarding the reintegration of Syria, but each of the members will formulate their own calculations.

Assad remains in the saddle

The winner could be Bashar al-Assad himself, because the process of thawing towards Syria includes him as an actor and interlocutor.

Although they turned their backs on him 12 years ago because of the violent suppression of protests that later turned into civil war, Arab allies are looking for a way to reintegrate Syria with Assad and his government as legitimate representatives.

The calculations and negotiations on the possible concessions for Syria and its return to the Arab community do not have any conditions for Assad to step down.

It is a key element that keeps Syria the option to normalise relations with its closest partners in the region, and is also a pragmatic motive for Arab leaders to extract maximum concessions from Damascus.

Exhausted by the civil war, in a devastated and isolated economy, with a territory over which

he does not have complete control, Bashar al-Assad considers the return to the Arab alliance as a turning point and a way that gives him a chance for political survival.

The initiative strongly pushed by Saudi Arabia apparently accepts that he remains in power, and in return achieves a closure of a major regional security hotspot.

Concessions expected from Syria

Almost all members of the Arab League, particularly those in the Gulf, have strong interests in the return of Syrian refugees, who came to their countries in large numbers.

Turkey has a similar motive. On the eve of the May 14 elections, all the presidential candidates agree that the return of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees should be ensured.

The Syrian leader is probably willing to accept these conditions, but there are no guarantees that he will not re-initiate repression when they return home, considering that mostly his political opponents have gone into exile since the war and persecution.

The Arab allies want to prevent large-scale drug smuggling through Syria, in particular, the synthetic drug Captagon, the so-called "cocaine for the poor", whose growing market is in Saudi Arabia.

Assad could be conditioned to reduce Iran's military presence in Syria, and if that is the case, Saudi Arabia would be expected to negotiate with Tehran, with whom it recently renewed diplomatic relations.

While the process of Syria's reintegration into the Arab League is far advanced, Western actors, above all the US, have no significant role, and there is every chance that the thaw will pass without their participation.

Bashar al-Assad remaining in power is in itself a negative outcome for the West, but it now looks like a foregone conclusion and a prerequisite for all future deals between Syria and its Arab partners.

“Assad remaining in power and Arab normalisation with Damascus seems to be a foregone conclusion at this point. The US and Europe have made it clear that they do not agree with Arab states normalising with the Assad regime, but there doesn’t seem to be much they can do about it”, said Anna Jacobs of the International Crisis Group.