

Burying the Axe of War: The Arabs Will Recognize Assad, and Arab Investment Will Help Rebuild Syria

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Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir made a historical visit to Syria, the first for an Arab leader since war was imposed on Syria in 2011. El-Bashir landed onboard a Russian airplane at Damascus airport, an indication of Moscow's efforts to bring Syria back into the Arab – and international – fold. During seven years of war, Sudan never closed its embassy in Damascus.

El-Bashir was not travelling alone. Sudan would not take such a huge step without the support of its allies. The Sudanese president is a close partner of Saudi Arabia and the Emirates in their destructive war on Yemen. The purpose of his visit is to lay down the road to Damascus for more Arab leaders, who are expected to pay tribute to president Bashar al-Assad in 2019. Their goal is to elbow aside the Islamic Republic of Iran, the only Islamic country omnipresent with friendly forces on the Damascus scene.

This is not the first contact between Arab countries and Syria since 2011: Egypt maintained its close diplomatic-political-security relationship with Syria throughout the years of war. Bahrain, the Emirates, Oman, Lebanon and Jordan are present today in Syria. On the western front, Italy is preparing to re-open its embassy, while Germany and France were not absent in recent years.

The arrival of el-Bashir onboard a Russian plane indicates the determination of President Vladimir Putin to sew a spider's web of relationships between the Middle East, the West and Syria. Putin aims to see Syria resume diplomatic relations with Arab and other countries. Russia and Syria dismiss the conditions the US is seeking to impose for reconstruction of the country and would like to see its unwelcome forces leave the Levant.

El-Bashir came to Syria at a time when the Middle Eastern countries acknowledge that their plan to create a failed state in the Levant has failed. Their goal was a failed state, not a new regime; their unlimited support to the Takfiree groups (i.e. the "Islamic State" ISIS and al-Qaeda) was pushing Syria towards total chaos, posing significant dangers to neighbouring countries with the exception of Israel. Tel Aviv welcomed both extremist religious groups, embraced them, and supported their presence on its border throughout the years of war in Syria.

After many years of war, the Syrian president is today harsher in his approach towards Israel, although he does not necessarily intend to initiate an attack to regain Syrian territory occupied by Israel in the Golan heights. Assad is happy to see a local Syrian resistance, similar to the Lebanese Hezbollah, developing along the borders and in other parts of the country.

Assad has not changed his stand towards Iran. On the contrary, years of war taught him to rely on those, like Iran, who offered billions of dollars to support the Syrian economy and sent tons of weapons and thousands of men to protect Syria's integrity.

The Syrian president has never flagged in support of Hezbollah. Since 1982 and until today, the Lebanese group received weapons and financial support through Syria. But today the bond is stronger than ever, particularly as Hezbollah offered hundreds of men killed in the battlefield and thousands of wounded for the unity of the Levant.

But yes, Assad's position towards Hamas has changed. He rejects any mediation from the secretary general of Hezbollah Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and from Iran to bring back Hamas into the "axis of the resistance". Assad considers the time is not ripe to reconcile with the Palestinian group because hundreds of its members fought within the ranks of ISIS and al-Qaeda and were responsible for the killing of Syrians.

The position of the Syrian president was firm throughout the war, notwithstanding the reach of ISIS (called Jabhat al-Nusra in 2013 before Joulani, its leader, declared loyalty to Ayman Zawaheri) to al-Abbaseyeen square in Damascus, threatening the government and the presidency. Saudi Arabia and the US offered to recognise Assad as the legitimate president of Syria in return for abandoning Hezbollah, Iran, and Hamas. Well aware of the treachery of his interlocutors, Assad refused and instead relied on trustworthy partners, i.e. Hezbollah and Iran (and Russia later on in 2015), to help him win the war imposed on his country.

El-Bashir's visit expresses the will of his sponsors to recognise Assad's victory and his leadership of Syria for fear of leaving him in the hands of Russia and Iran, who are reaping the rewards of their victory in Syria.

The young Bashar who became president at the age of 35 is today 53 years old with unparalleled political and war experience. Assad is pragmatic and by no means an ideologue. He will have no problems dealing with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the US, the countries which spearheaded the war against Syria and caused its destruction. Even more, Assad is ready to welcome these countries and invite them to have a piece of reconstruction even if trust will be absent. That is called the art of the impossible.

Recognition of Assad as president of Syria by the countries responsible for years of war will open the doors of investment for anyone willing to participate even if the US occupies northeast Syria for decades and if Turkey maintains its occupation of north-west of Syria.

El-Bashir wants Damascus to return to the Arab League – who expelled Syria in 2012 – when he is recognised by the Arabs as the legitimate president of the country. Syria is a state and will behave as such, not seeking revenge but offering a part of the Damascene cake to share with everyone prepared to help rebuild the country.

The visit of the Sudanese president was planned for more than a year and was blessed by the countries who took the most radical stand against Assad; these countries have accepted their defeat and recognize that Syria shall not fall. Turkey is also reconsidering its position, as evident from the recent statement of foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu: "if the [Syrian] elections are democratic and trustworthy, we will consider all possibilities [to cooperate with Assad in case of his re-election]". The Turkish-Syrian relationship is much more complicated than the Arab-Syria relationship. Ankara's troops occupy a part of Syria and are protecting al-Qaeda and its allies in Idlib, but President Erdogan shares a common goal with Damascus:

both seek the withdrawal of the US occupation forces and to prevent the Kurds from protecting US forces and imposing their enclave in north-east Syria.

The door to recognising Assad as the president of Syria is open to all Arabs without exception, along with their investment to rebuild the country. It is time to bury the Arab axe of war in the Levant.

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