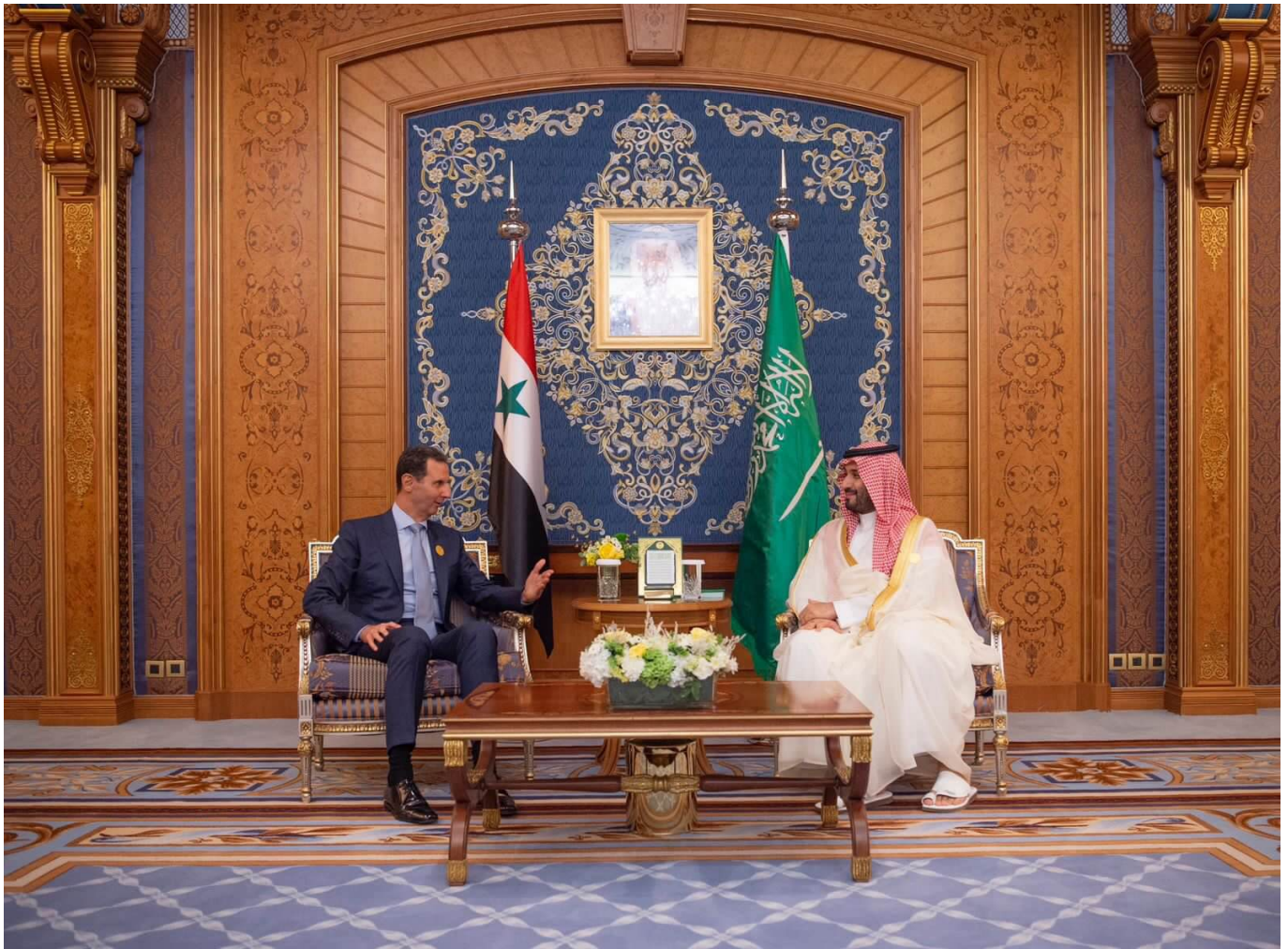




By: The Editorial Board

Assad's rehabilitation is a dangerous global precedent



Syria's President Bashar al-Assad received a warm welcome at the 32nd Arab League (AL) summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where his country was reinstated as a member after a 12-year suspension.

Syria returned to the 22-member bloc of Arab nations, but along with Syria, its leader returned - the same one whose violence against his own population got the country kicked out of the AL in 2011.

Who has changed in the meantime? Syria, President Assad, or the Arab League because the same actors made 2 opposite decisions in 12 years?

Syria has most definitely changed. Since the beginning of the conflict, about half a million of its citizens have died, about 5.5 million are refugees (UNHCR), and the country is so devastated that reconstruction would cost at least \$250 billion (UN).

Its sovereignty is questionable due to Iran, Russia, and Turkey's long-term involvement in conflicts. Today's Syria, which returned to the AL, is in an incomparably worse condition than the Syria that was expelled from the AL 12 years ago.

During that time, President Assad did not change. Today he can consider himself, to some extent, a winner in the civil war. He is still the head of state. He was not overthrown, expelled, or killed.

It is difficult to say if the Arab League has changed, but its informal leader Saudi Arabia has. Saudi Arabia's lobbying among partners helped return Syria and Assad to the pan-Arab family.

Under its influence, Syria's return was

accepted by the other bloc members. Some were satisfied, and some expressed considerable resentment and caution.

Choosing the lesser evil

The operation to return Syria to the Arab League is one part of Saudi Arabia's ambitious strategy to play a more influential role in the region and to do so independently, taking into account its interests exclusively summed up in the slogan "Saudi first".

Riyadh argues that the Arab world should accept the reality. Assad survived the civil war, dialogue with him is the only way for Syria to recover over time, and everyone will benefit from this.

"We have to invent new ways to meet the challenges facing our countries", said Saudi foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud.

Others accepted this logic as the lesser evil, hoping that the "carrot" that Assad received by returning to the Arab League would be a good start to demand concessions from him.

However, with his triumphant return to the Arab League, Assad gained the legitimacy of an equal partner and a negotiating factor.

In addition, he received the first, but very valuable, international post-war confirmation from Arab partners. He is to be reckoned with in the future, as he undertakes to implement the requirements that gave him a ticket to return to the club. For him, this is a sign that he is not threatened with overthrow in the

foreseeable future.

The return of refugees is under question

Whether Assad will fulfil those demands and expectations now depends more on him and his negotiating skills and less on the enormous international pressure he was exposed to, including the pressure of Arab partners who kept him isolated.

For now, he is not making big promises. He is not saying that he will enable the return of millions of refugees to Syria, a joint request of the Arab League members, where the largest number of Syrian citizens took refuge.

He put conditions on their return on cash, particularly from the Gulf states, which he would allegedly use to pay for the reconstruction of the country.

Apart from treating his fellow citizens as a means of blackmail and raising money, Assad does not really want their return en masse, because they are mostly his political opponents.

There is also no indication that Assad will tackle the production and distribution of Captagon, the synthetic drug known as "the poor man's cocaine", in which his country is a global leader.

Curbing the production and sale of Captagon is another significant demand of the Arab League partners, as their conservative circles are flooded with the Syrian synthetic drug or at least serve as a conduit for its global

distribution.

Assad does not seem like a person who would wage a war against the drug industry, which, according to the estimates of some specialised international organisations, amounted to about \$3.5 billion in exports in 2020.

State structures, local militias, and mafia families are also involved in this business. They form an untouchable network from which Assad's repressive apparatus benefited greatly during the years of the civil war.

The danger of Assad's full rehabilitation

By returning to the Arab League, Assad took the first but significant step in international rehabilitation. His regime is still heavily sanctioned by the West, which makes him an apostate.

His readmittance to the Arab League Syria "signals to Assad that his barbaric behaviour is acceptable - these steps towards normalisation are reckless", said US Congressman French Hill, co-sponsor of the bipartisan Act, which would oblige the US not to recognise any government in Damascus led by Assad.

However, the precedent set at the Jeddah summit gives Assad hope that some parts of the rehabilitation will be possible, and perhaps even his complete return to the international scene, as a factor with which the entire world will cooperate.

If such a thing happens, the fate of the Syrian leader will represent an encouragement to every dictator in the world that crimes against their own population, against regional and global security, do not always have to be punished.

The regimes of his biggest supporters and sponsors, those in Moscow and Tehran, look forward to his rehabilitation because they see Assad's success as their own.

In Assad's case, crimes have now, paid off. The members of the Arab League, who have embraced him, now have a responsibility to force Syria and its leader to make the concessions he has committed to.

Otherwise, they will open the door wide for him and others like him to create new disasters, expecting to avoid punishment based on Assad's case.