

**Middle Eastern politics & society**

## Saudi Arabia hosts Syrian foreign minister for first time since civil war

Visit is the latest sign that Arab countries who once opposed regime are moving closer to embracing Damascus



Waleed El Khereiji, deputy Saudi foreign minister, right, meets Faisal Mekdad, Syrian foreign minister, in Jeddah © Saudi Press Agency/Handout/Reuters

**Samer Al-Atrush** in Dubai and **Raya Jalabi** in Beirut YESTERDAY

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Syria's foreign minister has visited Saudi Arabia for the first time in more than a decade, as Arab governments who opposed President Bashar al-Assad during his country's civil war move closer to embracing Damascus.

The visit on Wednesday comes days before an Arab foreign ministers meeting in [Saudi Arabia](#) that will discuss restoring Syria's seat in the Arab League, according to a Qatari official cited in that country's media.

[Syria](#) was suspended from the pan-Arab organisation in 2012 after Assad's brutal crackdown on a popular uprising triggered the outbreak of civil war that devastated the country. Assad has since regained control over much of Syria, thanks to Russian and Iranian military support.

The warming of regional ties has picked up since the devastating earthquake in February that killed at least 6,000 people in Syria, as well as close to 46,000 in neighbouring Turkey. The foreign ministers of the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Egypt have separately visited Damascus, while Assad has travelled to Oman and the UAE.

The UAE has led the push to bring Assad in from the cold. Prince Faisal bin Farhan

al-Saud, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, also said in February that there was "a growing consensus" in the Arab world that isolating Syria was not working. He suggested a different approach was being worked on to address issues such as Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries and the humanitarian disaster caused by the quake.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt were among those who had been opposed to restoring Syria's place in the Arab League, arguing, among other reasons, that it would give Damascus's ally Iran a seat at the table.

However, Saudi Arabia has recently moved to defuse tensions with Iran, agreeing this year to restore diplomatic ties.

The Syrian leader may also be invited to join an Arab summit next month in Saudi Arabia, officials familiar with the talks said.

The officials also said some countries, including Qatar and Kuwait, still had objections against Syria. Saudi Arabia also still has conditions that it wants the Syrian leader to commit to, including progress on the millions of Syrian refugees who fled the war.

Faisal Mekdad, Syrian foreign minister, met deputy Saudi foreign minister Waleed El Khereiiji to discuss "efforts to reach a political solution in Syria . . . and to facilitate the return of refugees", according to Saudi state media. Syrian state news agency Sana described Mekdad's trip as a "working visit to discuss bilateral relations and issues of mutual interest".

Mekdad also travelled to Egypt this month, his first public visit to the country in several years. An official with knowledge of the talks said Cairo, which hosts the Arab League's headquarters, had since dropped its objections to readmitting Syria to the pan-Arab organisation.

Tunisia, whose leadership has pushed for Syria's return to the Arab League, on Wednesday fully restored its diplomatic ties with Damascus, in another sign that the Syrian regime was being rehabilitated by its neighbours.

In a joint statement, Syria said it would reopen its embassy in Tunisia, while Tunisia would send an ambassador to Damascus.

The US has imposed sanctions on Syria and spoken out against dealings with Assad, but did little to act against its ally the UAE last year when it became the first Arab country to host Assad on a state visit since the civil war broke out.

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