

Make sense of it all.

Become an FT subscriber

Try the FT for \$1

Syria

Foreign ministers undecided on readmitting Syria to Arab League

Opponents of normalisation say Assad has done little to rehabilitate himself



Syria's president Bashar al-Assad, right, with Egypt's foreign minister Sameh Shoukry in Damascus in February © AFP via Getty Images

Samer Al-Atrush in Dubai APRIL 15 2023

A meeting by Arab foreign ministers to debate Syria's readmission to the Arab League has ended without agreement, underscoring deep divisions across the region almost 12 years after the country descended into a brutal civil war.

While some countries have moved to normalise relations with Syria others, are bitterly opposed, saying Bashar al-Assad has done little to rehabilitate himself.

The talks in the Saudi city of Jeddah on Friday came days after Syria's foreign minister [visited the kingdom](#), which is considering inviting Assad to the Arab League summit next month.

The Saudi foreign ministry said on Saturday that the ministers had agreed to further discuss on a political resolution to the conflict in Syria and conditions to allow the repatriation of millions of Syrian refugees.

Two officials with knowledge of the meeting said there was sharp pushback against Saudi rapprochement from countries, including Qatar, Kuwait and Jordan. "They all asked . . . what are you getting from them?" one of them said.

One sticking point was [Captagon](#), a highly addictive amphetamine whose trade has become an economic lifeline for the Asad regime.

“It’s become a narco state, the trade is four or five billion [dollars] a year. And we can’t pay [the price for] that,” the official said.

“The Syrians want total surrender. Some are joking that they might even ask for an apology,” the official said.

Another official said readmitting Syria while Iran had troops in the country and exercised influence over Assad would reward Tehran. “We are stripping for the Iranians,” he said.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states supported the Syrian opposition. But although they seized swaths of territory during the early years of the civil war, Assad has regained much of the country with Russian and Iranian military support.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom’s day-to-day ruler, wants to focus on his economic reforms without the threat of war and regional distractions, diplomats and Saudi officials have said.

Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud said in February that there was a growing consensus in the region that isolating Syria was not working. Assad has visited the United Arab Emirates and Oman this year.

“Saudi Arabia sees Bashar as a reality now fixed on the ground that has to be dealt with on many issues, not least the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Saudi [Arabia] who want to go home, narcotics and other issues,” said Ali Shihabi, a Saudi commentator familiar with the royal court’s thinking.

The devastating earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria in February has also contributed to a thaw in relations.

Egypt, where the Arab League is headquartered, has conditionally dropped its opposition to Assad but it wants at least a show of progress on a political resolution, officials with knowledge of the matter said.

At the meeting on Wednesday, the Saudi and Syrian foreign ministers said they had discussed the conditions for a political resolution and the return of refugees, as well as tackling narcotics smuggling

A thawing in Arab relations with Assad would risk angering the US, which has placed sanctions on Syria’s government, although Washington has not taken action against its ally the UAE for hosting Assad this year and in 2022.

Saudi Arabia, along with the UAE, has moved to defuse tensions with Iran and to resolve a long-running war in Yemen against Iranian-backed rebels. On Friday, Saudi Arabia and the Houthis exchanged hundreds of prisoners of war.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
