



GULF STATES' SYRIA APPROACH

Regional Pragmatism in the Face of Global Multipolarity

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October 2023

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ABBREVIATIONS

AL	Arab League
AQAP	Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
COP	Conference of the Parties
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FSA	Free Syrian Army
FTS	Financial Tracking
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OEC	Observatory of Economic Complexity
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PV	Photovoltaic
RACA	Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities
SNC	Syrian National Council
SOC	Syrian Oppositional Council
STC	Southern Transitional Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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INTRODUCTION

The normalization with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and Syria's reintegration into the Arab League (AL) decided in May 2023 at the AL Summit in Jeddah after 12 years of Syrian isolation was mainly prepared and orchestrated by some of the Gulf monarchies – first and foremost the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman together with Jordan.¹ After the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria in spring 2023, other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)² such as Saudi Arabia also used the humanitarian emergency as a momentum to create closer ties with the al-Assad regime as part of their “earthquake diplomacy.”³

The rapprochement with the Syrian regime thus means a turnaround in the GCC states' approach towards Syria after the war started in 2011. At that time, Gulf monarchies aimed to push al-Assad to implement political reforms but this approach failed. In contrast, both the brutal crackdown and al-Assad's rejection to implement the AL's Arab Initiative, which called for a comprehensive dialogue to halt the Syrian bloodshed led to the suspension of Syria from the AL in November 2011.⁴ In the following years, some GCC states also engaged to support different parts of the Syrian anti-Assad opposition but reduced such cooperation to a minimum as the al-Assad regime, with the military support from Russia and Iran, has gained back most of the Syrian territory in recent years.

After years of condemnation of al-Assad's cruel crackdown on internal opposition and large parts of the Syrian population, the current reconciliation in the Gulf-Syrian politics fits into the broader GCC states' approach that promotes regional de-escalation and conflict management.⁵ In an attempt to position themselves in a multipolar global order, indicated by a shifting role of the United States as the traditional security provider and the rise of China, they have started to follow a more self-reliant and self-confident trajectory to ease regional tensions and hedge shifting regional alliances in their national interests. Against this backdrop, Syria's reintegration into the Arab fold and the AL does not come as a surprise. The motivations are multifold: Economic diversification, interest in investment and reconstruction, drug trafficking control, balancing Iran's regional influence, and refugee management serve as main drivers for the GCC states' reengagement with Syria. Yet above all, the primary goal is to preserve regional stability in order to promote national security and economic growth.

However, the Gulf monarchies do not act in a unified manner; polarization among them on the Syria file

remains high as some states such as Qatar continue to strongly resist normalization. In other words, their politics on Syria illustrates that the Gulf monarchies are not a monolithic body but have an ambivalent stance on Syria. The level of trust in al-Assad is still significantly low. He is thus mainly considered as a partner of necessity, not a partner of choice. Therefore, achieving tangible outcomes from the normalization will most likely be challenging. Expectations in Syria's commitment to fight drug trafficking and turn away from its partner Iran might be too high. In addition, rifts and disputes inside the GCC could intensify if benefits from the normalization with Syria do not materialize as intended. Finally, the elephant in the room is the United States: On the one hand, economic perspectives for Syrian-Gulf cooperation seems promising if the US would accept the normalization and allow specific GCC states to invest in Syria. So far, it seems more likely that such acceptance may come in the form of a tactical green lightning behind the scenes rather than an official US endorsement. The US position in Syria also highly depends on the results of the next presidential elections in 2024: If Donald Trump will be elected as the next president, some Gulf states hope for a shift in US sanctions' policy on Syria. On the other hand, if the US exerts pressure on the Gulf monarchies to adhere to the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act⁶, prospects for investment and reconstruction in Syria remain bleak. Gulf states need to carefully balance between their economic interest in Syria as a neighboring market and their relations with Washington. The Caesar Act could thus pose a challenge to Gulf economic engagement in Syria while limiting actions in the reconstruction sector.⁷

Against this backdrop, the policy paper analyzes the motivations of the Gulf monarchies to normalize relations with Syria. It focuses on underlying regional and international drivers for such a step and further sheds light on the respective Gulf monarchies and their specific positions on Syria. In this regard, divergent perspectives among the Gulf states are taken into consideration and respective areas of possible contestation as well as collaboration are explored.

1. Aziz El Yaakoubi and Samia Nakhoul, Syria's Assad wins warm welcome at Arab summit after years of isolation, May 19, 2023; OCHA Relief Web, Syria: The Impunity of the Assad Regime Must Never be Normalized, July 12, 2023.

2. The GCC comprises of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain.

3. Mustafa Karahamad and Regine Schwab, Arab States' Incentives Towards (not) Normalizing Relations with Syria – Islamists and Drug Trafficking? May 16, 2023.

4. Sultan Alamer, The Arab Regional Order and Assad: From Ostracism to Normalization, June 14, 2023.

5. Steven Heydemann, Syria's normalization signals a new Middle Eastern order, May 10, 2023.

6. The Act defines sanctions and financial restrictions on institutions and individuals related to the conflict in Syria; US Congress, H.R.31 – Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, June 3, 2019.

7. Giorgio Cafiero and Brett Sudetic, Oman's Diplomatic Moves in Syria, December 17, 2020.

THE GCC ENGAGEMENT IN SYRIA IN LIGHT OF REGIONAL GEOSTRATEGIC SHIFTS

Syria's Normalization in Light of Regional Reconciliation

The normalization with Syria's al-Assad regime is driven by the GCC states' motivation to enhance regional de-escalation and reconciliation to overcome tensions and mitigate conflicts.⁸ Even though the Gulf monarchies still consider the al-Assad regime's survival as a negative development contradicting their initial goals, it has become a de facto reality that needs to be accepted – whether they like it or not.⁹ Hence, Syria's reintegration fits into the regional framework for conflict management while turning away from previous ideological differences, confessional cleavages and sectarian divides.¹⁰ In this regard, Arab regional players are entering a new period in their foreign policies after years of growing conflict and tensions. Recently, the regional policy of most of the Gulf monarchies was driven by rivalry and competition, power projection and defamation. The so-called "Gulf crisis" between June 2017 and January 2021 showcased the existing divergences among respective Gulf monarchies.¹¹ As promoters of the anti-Islamist counter-revolution, the blockading quartet Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt considered Qatar's quest for ideological influence across the region and its substantial support for Islamist movements in Tunisia and Egypt after the "Arab Uprisings" as a challenge for their (monarchical) legitimacy.¹² Furthermore, the UAE and Saudi Arabia aimed to push back Qatar's successful business model that reached global significance in terms of public diplomacy and soft power. Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt cut diplomatic relations with their neighbor, closing off airspace, land and sea borders. However, none of the intended goals of the blockade were achieved as Doha successfully diversified its external security and economic partnerships with Turkey and Iran while retaining US-support.¹³

Since the AL Ula Declaration lifted the Qatar blockade in January 2021, the GCC states find themselves in a *modus vivendi* indicated by closer cooperation with each other in some policy fields. However, at the same time there are growing rivalries and competition in sectors such as hydrogen production, power projection or sport investments.¹⁴ Furthermore, they seek to balance Iranian influence in Syria and find common ground for a tactical rapprochement with Tehran by taking a less confrontational approach.¹⁵ Iran's influence in the direct neighborhood of the Gulf monarchies has grown in recent years, directly undermining some states' national security interests. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the relationship between the Gulf monarchies

and the Islamic Republic is characterized by ups and downs, by periods of contestation and cooperation, by demonization and dialogue. Iran's proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq and in particular in Syria have impacted the regional position of Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, which saw an intensification of the conflict with Iran in recent years. The security situation deteriorated after the attacks on the two Saudi oil refineries Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019 triggered a short-lived 50% loss of oil production.¹⁶ The missiles are believed to have been launched by Iran. For Saudi Arabia, this event – the kingdom's "9/11" – was both a wake-up call and a shock showcasing its security vulnerability.¹⁷ Regarding the Saudi desire to increase its regional agency, it was the straw that broke the camel's back when it comes to relying on US security. From a Saudi perspective, relations with Washington have always experienced turbulences, especially in view of the US' commitment to protect the kingdom, but they entered a new nadir after the September attacks. To the concern of some in Riyadh, when the oil refineries were attacked, there was no US reaction towards Iran. This episode thus created a watershed moment in the Saudi regional trajectory, as the kingdom came to the conclusion that it cannot base its regional policy on the reaction of external actors, namely the US. In the Syrian context, Saudi Arabia also considered the lack of US military reaction on chemical gas attacks by the Syrian regime in Ghouta in August 2013 as a further rift in their relations. In 2012, prior to the attacks, then-president Barack Obama stated that such actions by the al-Assad regime would be considered a "red line" that would be followed by affirmative action.¹⁸ However, no concrete military strikes took place, which deeply concerned the Saudi leadership and resulted in growing distrust in the Obama administration.¹⁹

In light of increasing US-Saudi tensions, Saudi Arabia's approach towards Iran (and Syria) shifted from defamation to dialogue. Based on the assumption that national security is vulnerable to external threats and affected by the negative economic implications of dwindling oil prices and shrinking GDP growth during the COVID-19 pandemic ("dual shock"), the Saudi kingdom intensified its diplomatic efforts by reaching out to regional rivals such as Qatar, Turkey and – most significantly – to Iran.²⁰ After five rounds of direct talks between Iranian and Saudi security officials, which started in 2020 and were hosted by Iraq and facilitated by Oman, both countries signed an agreement in March 2023 – negotiated by China – to restore diplomatic ties that were cut in January 2016.²¹ By engaging directly with Iran, the Saudi government also seeks to find a tactical solution in order to preserve national integrity and stop drone attacks by the Iran-supported

Houthis on Saudi territory.²² Other GCC states such as Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, and also the UAE welcomed this step as those states have traditionally taken a more pragmatic stance towards Iran. Traditionally, Kuwait and Oman consider conciliatory ties with Iran as a driver for national and regional stability whereas Qatar shares the largest gas field with the Islamic Republic. Dubai has close economic ties with Iranian business and trade elites. At the same time, the Gulf monarchies and Iran face similar challenges that could result in enhanced cooperation such as climate change, international drug smuggling and pressures regarding economic and foreign policy diversification. Thus, the policy towards Iran is currently characterized by tactical pragmatism and interest-oriented opportunism.²³

Finally, economic motivations drive the Gulf monarchies' engagement in regional reconciliation and conflict management. In particular Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have established business models that are in dire need of foreign direct investment (FDI), free trade flows, and power projection through public diplomacy. Hence, the Gulf monarchies are interested in finding a *modus operandi* for joint collaboration in order to preserve their respective business models and global brands. In all Gulf states, developmental visions have been introduced to focus on non-oil economic diversification in sectors such as tourism, entertainment, or entrepreneurship. Given that all Gulf monarchies are undergoing substantial socioeconomic transformations and need to prepare for the post-oil era, regional security is considered a principal prerequisite for economic diversification. Especially Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Kuwait are still facing tremendous socioeconomic obstacles and need to intensify their economic transformation. In Saudi Arabia, youth unemployment (age 15 to 24) stood at 23.4%.²⁴ In Kuwait, more than 15% of the young population is unemployed and in Oman, the share of unemployed youth is as high as 50%.²⁵ Subsidies still constitute 90% of the state budget. Although nationalization and localization efforts in the respective job markets are making progress, the private sector still underperforms and FDI is lacking behind in most of the Gulf monarchies. Against this backdrop, current normalization with Syria is driven by pragmatic *realpolitik* and underscores the GCC states' interest to manage conflicts in order to preserve economic and security stability. Such motivations thus impact their reengagement with Syria on different levels.

Saudi Arabia's Engagement in Syria

In general, Saudi Arabia is considered a status quo state that prefers to operate in an environment of regional stability, especially when it comes to its

direct neighborhood. With that in mind, historically Saudi-Syrian relations have been driven by strategic aspirations. There are ample incidents where both states displayed a strong commitment to their respective security interests. For example, when Saudi Arabia was building an Arab coalition to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, the kingdom requested Syria's political support. Rather than just giving his assistance, then-President Hafez al-Assad responded to the request by sending Syrian forces to participate in the coalition, pleased to be able to undermine his main contender at that time, Iraq's Saddam Hussein. In turn, Saudi Arabia subsequently invested diplomatic efforts in removing the Syrian regime from the US terrorist state sponsored list, yet to no avail. This example shows that the Saudi ruling elite had good strategic relations with Syria under Hafez al-Assad, who knew how to skillfully balance relations between Saudi Arabia, the Arab states and Iran.

This changed, however, when Bashar al-Assad's ascended to power in the summer of 2000. Relations between the two states under the al-Assad regime developed cordially until early 2005 when it was widely believed that Syria was responsible for the assassination of Rafik al-Hariri, the Lebanese business tycoon who also held Saudi citizenship and was considered as a staunch Saudi ally in Lebanon.²⁶ From then on relations began to deteriorate after the Hezbollah-Israel war and in particular after the outbreak of the "Arab Uprisings" and the start of the war in Syria. At that point, Saudi Arabia started to engage by providing support to specific parts within the diverse and unconsolidated Syrian opposition, each faction of which claimed to be "the anti-Assad force" while competing for the funds to bolster such efforts. Although information on the actual extent of Saudi support to the Syrian opposition is rather limited, the flow of such support mainly took two directions: towards the Syrian political opposition and the Syrian rebels.

At the beginning of the conflict, Saudi Arabia was reluctant in its support of the anti-Assad coalition but intensified its engagement in Syria in light of the growing tensions with Qatar. Qatar started to impose its influence on the political track of the anti-Assad forces. As tensions and divergences between Saudi Arabia and Qatar started to intensify in 2014, no coherent Gulf engagement in Syria existed. Therefore, the growing rift between Qatar and Saudi Arabia due to the conflicting interests in regional policy were hampering the overall anti-Assad effort. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia and Qatar in cooperation with the US established the Syrian Military Operations Command in 2014 so as to better harmonize their efforts and reduce their support to Salafi groups, Saudi Arabia also started to

support specific oppositional groups such as the Syrian National Council (SNC) in order to balance Qatar's engagement in Syria.²⁷ However, there were two main issues for Saudi Arabia regarding the SNC: First, the latter is mainly viewed as a Sunni Arab dominated body not representative of Syrian minorities such as Kurds, Alawites and Druze factions. Secondly, the SNC leaned towards the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudi Arabia considered a pro-Qatari position.²⁸ As a consequence, Saudi political support transitioned from the SNC to the Syrian Oppositional Council (SOC). The SOC functioned as the new political anti-Assad entity that was aimed to be more representative of other minorities and encompassing a broader political opposition. Notwithstanding a broader coalition and representation, the SOC was also considered a coalition that was mainly led by Qatar and with strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁹ As a result of Saudi-US pressure and concurrent abdication of the Qatari throne by Emir Hamad in 2013, Qatar's engagement in Syria started to wane. This, in turn, allowed the Saudi role to increase and became more assertive. Already in July 2012, Saudi appointed Prince Bander bin Sultan as the head of intelligence.³⁰ This was widely seen as a projection of the Saudi intention and growing assertiveness regarding the Syria file. In essence, Saudi Arabia changed its support strategy from a "leading from behind" approach to a more assertive "leading from the front" stance in the war. Prince Bander, as the long-time ambassador to the US, cultivated strong connections to the political circles in Washington D.C. His appointment was indicative of the Saudi intention to internationalize the anti-Assad effort as the US was known to pressure Qatar to restructure the SOC. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia ensured that its preferred appointees backing Saudi interests were filling SOC leadership positions.³¹ The Saudi position of the political track was further strengthened after Emir Tamim succeeded his father Hamad in 2013, shifting Qatar's regional policy towards greater pragmatism and less ideological support for pro-Islamist movements. Similar to the political track of the anti-Assad campaign, the track on how to deal with anti-Assad groups ('rebel track') was not unified and even more fragmented under Emir Tamim. Initially, Saudi Arabia together with the US began to support the Free Syrian Army (FSA).³² The FSA, an umbrella organization that included a plethora of rebel groups, had the aim of toppling the al-Assad regime as its common goal. There were two ways through which the FSA received support from the kingdom: Firstly, Saudi Arabia did not obstruct Syrian expats living in the kingdom to fund the FSA, which enabled the latter to maintain its operations. Secondly, and more directly, it is reported that Saudi Arabia bought light infantry weapons such as machine guns, anti-tank systems and ammunition

from Croatia and sent it to the FSA via Jordan.³³

However, due to lacking FSA long term military successes, Saudi Arabia ceased its support and began to rethink its choices of whom to support. Therefore, in November 2013, the kingdom shifted its support from the FSA to the Jabhat al-Islamiyah – or Islamic Front.³⁴ The Islamic Front, a Salafi-orientated group, was chosen by Saudi Arabia for two reasons: First, the Islamic Front was not in favor of the FSA (and not in favor of Qatar), and it opposed the growing rise of the so-called 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS). Furthermore, the Saudi engagement was affected by growing domestic uncertainties: The ailing King Abdullah suffered from serious health issues and died in January 2015. Even before, Bandar bin Sultan had been removed from his position in 2014 due to a perceived mishandling of the Syrian file by King Abdullah and the powers that were in the Royal Court.³⁵ Abdullah's successor King Salman started to put increased focus on Saudi military engagement in Yemen, which began in March 2015 with "Operation Decisive Storm." The Saudi-led military campaign claimed complete Saudi attention, thus resulting in reduced focus on the Syrian file. In addition, Saudi Arabia began to work on fundamental economic and social reforms. In 2016, the Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman announced his so-called "Vision 2030" which entails a large compendium of policies, principles and goals aimed at diversifying the Saudi oil-reliant economy at its core. As such, "Vision 2030" promotes ambitious investments in non-oil sectors such as tourism, entertainment or sports while aiming to create jobs for Saudi nationals and to attract foreign direct investments (FDI) to position the kingdom as an emerging economic and technological hub. The kingdom has thus realigned its resource usage towards the proclaimed goals and in doing so, turned away from the Syrian conflict that carried unsustainable financial, political, and technical costs. Finally, the internationalization of the conflict, marked by the Russian military involvement, also contributed to Saudi Arabia's decision to reduce its engagement in Syria. By that time, and against the backdrop of domestic reforms, the conflict with the Houthis and potential cooperation with Russia regarding oil prices, Saudi deemed a confrontation with Syria that is aggravated by the Russian presence too costly.

In general, the Saudi position was to maintain the status quo irrespective of Bashar Al-Assad's distrustful position towards Riyadh. Yet, due to his unwavering alliance with Iran and growing pressure on Saudi Arabia to act in support of the (albeit unconsolidated) anti-Assad block, the kingdom took the decision to support the removal of Assad and subsequently his replacement with a more Riyadh-friendly

regime.³⁶ This would have inevitably curtailed Iran's influence in Syria. However, the Saudi leadership designed no clear strategy apart from opposing al-Assad. In addition, this lack of strategy was compounded by a lack of experience in leading efforts to overthrow regimes such as Assad's given that the kingdom traditionally preferred to manage a situation of crisis rather than assertively change it.

After 2016, Saudi priorities shifted once more as a wave of hyper-nationalism ensued in the Gulf while intentions to overthrow Assad were reduced. A "Saudi first" strategy began to dictate the Saudi foreign policy from 2016 onwards.³⁷ In addition, domestic political issues such as the consolidation of the position of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic further lessened Saudi Arabia's attention towards the Syrian file. However, the earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria presented the kingdom with an opportunity to initiate relations with Damascus and change the status quo of their relations. After a few bilateral meetings conducted by security and foreign policy officials, Saudi Arabia went ahead and used its position as the host of the AL summit to push for Syria's reintegration.³⁸

The United Arab Emirates' Engagement in Syria

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, the UAE was a forerunner in promoting normalization with Syria. Since the beginning of the conflict, the UAE shifted its position on Syria from supporting the opposition to withdrawal from the conflict to open rapprochement with the al-Assad regime.³⁹ The phase of rapprochement already started back in 2018 when the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus and sent a Chargé d'Affairs, which underlined Abu Dhabi's conciliatory stance towards the al-Assad regime during the war. After the visit of UAE's Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed al-Nahyan in November 2021 – the first high-ranking trip of a UAE official to Syria since 2011 – Emirati efforts to enhance bilateral ties with the al-Assad regime intensified. At the 2020 Dubai Expo, Syria was represented by an official delegation that included Economy and Foreign Trade Minister Mohammad Samer al-Khalil, and Assistant Foreign and Expatriates Minister Ayman Sousan.⁴⁰ During the pandemic, ties grew even closer as the UAE delivered vaccination and medical supply to Syria in order to enhance political leverage.⁴¹ Finally, al-Assad's first visit to the UAE in March 2022, where he met Muhammad bin Zayed, was a game changer in the UAE-Syrian relations.⁴² From an Abu Dhabi perspective, Syria provides an excellent opportunity to create networks; to al-Assad but also to his key ally Russia. In times of a multipolar global order, the UAE considers such networks as a viable

asset for its hedging approach and as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis the United States.⁴³ For the UAE, one way to potentially build such networks is through economic engagement with Syria, which also provides an explanation for the early UAE efforts to reengage with Syria. In 2021, both states agreed to enhance economic cooperation as part of the UAE's diversification efforts and established the Syrian-Emirati Joint Businessmen Council in October.⁴⁴ However, finalization of the project remains uncertain due to US sanctions against Syria.⁴⁵ Since 2017, the UAE has been the third-most important supplier of goods to Syria, with exports standing at USD 750 million in 2020.⁴⁶ Emirati exports are, however, mostly Chinese and Iranian products transiting through Dubai. For the UAE, Syria presents a potentially interesting market for investment and trade as it aims to take a pole position by establishing close relations to Syrian stakeholders. Additionally, Abu Dhabi considers Iran's omnipresence in Syria as a potential threat to its own power projection and thus wants to create an (economic) alternative for the al-Assad regime while at the same time keeping conciliatory business ties with Tehran via Dubai.⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the earthquake in Syria and Turkey, bin Zayed traveled once again to Syria in February 2023 and also discussed humanitarian assistance with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken as part of its "emergency diplomacy" – a significant step towards the subsequent normalization.⁴⁸ Vice versa, al-Assad seized the opportunity to travel to the UAE for the second time in March 2023 and was invited by the UAE to participate in the United Nations climate conference COP28, which will be hosted by Dubai in November/December 2023.⁴⁹

Qatar's Engagement in Syria

Qatar's policy towards Syria is driven by strategic interests and stands in direct opposition to the current normalization efforts undertaken by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Since Emir Hamad's bloodless coup that saw the expulsion of his father Khalifa in 1995, Qatar adopted a policy aimed at increasing its regional agency.⁵⁰ As part of this policy, it aimed to take a more autonomous position from its Gulf neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE by diversifying its regional relations and strengthening ties with states like Turkey, Iran, and Syria. As a result, members of the Qatari royal family began to establish personal relations with Bashar al-Assad.⁵¹ However, Qatar's assertive regional policy after the "Arab Uprisings", which included ideological and financial assistance to Islamist movements in Tunisia and Egypt, put it on a collision course with the Syrian regime. As a result, it did not come as a surprise that Qatar was one of the first states to cut relations with Syria in July 2011.⁵² Later on, Qatar

took a leading role in providing both political and armed support for the Syrian opposition with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. In doing so, Qatar continued its pro-Islamist policy across the region and challenged the status-quo powers Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁵³ Doha thus considered the “Arab Uprisings” as a great chance to change the region in its favor whereby the Syrian file constituted a prime opportunity. Similar to Saudi Arabia, Qatar’s support flow can be divided into the political and rebel realm: Politically, Qatar provided assistance to the SNC as a vehicle to increase an Islamist presence in the anti-Assad coalition. In this regard, Doha constituted a safe platform for the SNC and Qatar also facilitated the emergence of the SOC. This enabled Qatar to put more Muslim Brotherhood operatives in strategic positions that oversaw military and financial affairs. Regarding the rebels, Qatar initially supported the FSA⁵⁴ and also provided Chinese anti-tank systems, machine guns and ammunition to militant anti-Assad groups. Furthermore, soft power instruments such as intense public coverage through its Al-Jazeera media network contributed to the promotion of the anti-Assad campaign. From the very outset of the war, Al-Jazeera’s platforms were not only supporting the anti-Assad coalition(s), but the entire discourse - be it in Arabic or English - were geared towards toppling the Assad regime.⁵⁵ However, Qatar’s political and military support to the Syrian opposition started to decline in times of growing inner-Gulf tensions - namely the Gulf crises of 2014 and 2017. While both Gulf crises contributed towards steering the Qatari ruling elite’s attention away from its support towards the anti-Assad efforts, its media and soft power campaign against al-Assad did not cease.⁵⁶ From a Qatari perspective, normalization with al-Assad is viewed with great skepticism: Qatar demands significant concessions from the al-Assad regime towards the Syrian opposition, which Damascus did not fulfil as of now.⁵⁷ So far, Qatar continues to criticize the al-Assad regime for its brutal crackdown on the opposition and the Syrian civilian population. It continues to take a position that is more aligned with the human rights approach of the US and Europe, and utilizes this stance against full-fledged normalization with Syria as a bargaining chip to consolidate relations with the West. Against this backdrop, Qatar remains hesitant to formally normalize relations with the Syrian regime while taking a wait-and-see position. Unlike Saudi Arabia, it is not directly situated along the drug smuggling route or shares a border with any of the main transiting states (i.e. Syria, Jordan and Iraq) in that regard. Thus, Qatar does not sense the same urgency when it comes to coordinating with Syria in security-related matters. Nonetheless, such a position also bears the risk of increased isolation from other Gulf monarchies, which are accepting normalization with Syria as a necessary step

towards regional reconciliation.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Turkey, which is also gradually moving toward rapprochement with Syria, could push Qatar to take a more conciliatory position on normalization.⁵⁹ Turkey and Qatar have established close ties in recent years and Ankara significantly supported Doha during the “Gulf crisis”.

Kuwait’s Engagement in Syria

From all GCC states, throughout recent history Kuwait stood out as one of the closest allies to Syria in the two decades leading up to the “Arab Uprisings”. Those close ties can be attributed to the stance of the al-Assad regime during the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and Syria’s role in supporting Kuwait’s liberation. An illustration of the close bond between the two nations was evident in the special invitations extended to Bashar al-Assad to attend the 10th and 20th anniversary of Kuwait’s liberation in 2001 and 2011 respectively. The fact that al-Assad was among the selected few leaders that were invited highlighted the depth of their connection.⁶⁰

Diplomatic ties between both countries deteriorated at the beginning of the war in Syria when Kuwait, along with several other Arab countries, closed its embassy and supported the Syrian opposition and called for the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In contrast to other Gulf states, Kuwait was also more reluctant in re-normalizing ties with Syria. It was only by 2014 that a working relationship was reestablished. Kuwait commenced offering consular services to the 140,000 Syrian residents in the Gulf nation. In 2019, bilateral relations partially improved, but a reconciliation has not yet occurred. Despite an increase in Arab cooperation with the al-Assad regime in the late 2010s, Kuwait stated that any decision regarding diplomatic relations would be based on the consensus of the AL. Unlike its Gulf neighbors (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman), Kuwait remained hesitant about diplomatic rapprochement. Furthermore, the Kuwaiti government refuted false media reports suggesting that there may have been a visit by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Damascus in spring 2023.⁶¹

Kuwait’s careful approach in restoring ties with the al-Assad regime resembles the country’s long-term approach of multilateralism.⁶² It further underlines the official government account that no political, financial or military support has been provided to any of the involved conflict parties. Instead, Kuwait has focused on humanitarian assistance. The country hosted three donor conferences and took part in several international conferences on the humanitarian situation in Syria. However, Kuwait was also the only Gulf monarchy that refused the international

declaration to criminalize terrorist financing. Due to its lax financial regulations, Kuwait played a pivotal role as a primary center for private fundraising towards Syria. Consequently, over the last 13 years, the country became a central informal node for various stakeholders inside and outside Kuwait to send donations to various armed groups fighting in Syria.⁶³

Bahrain's Engagement in Syria

As the smallest Gulf monarchy, Bahrain traditionally balances its regional policy between its stronger and larger neighbors. Since the "Arab Uprisings", which also spurred public protests against the Sunni Al Khalifa ruling family, its dependency on the UAE and Saudi Arabia has grown, as both intervened to repress the protests that threatened the ruling family.⁶⁴ Since then, Bahrain has heavily relied on economic, financial, security and political support from both the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Against this backdrop, Bahrain's normalization with al-Assad needs to be considered as a "trial balloon" for Saudi Arabia as Manama mainly pins its foreign policy decisions to Riyadh. In this way, Riyadh aimed to test the waters regarding economic and political cooperation with Syria in the scope of Bahrain's normalization with Damascus.⁶⁵ In December 2021, Bahrain appointed Waheed Mubarak Sayyar, the kingdom's first ambassador to Damascus since it downgraded ties with Syria early on in the conflict.⁶⁶ Despite the fact that no ambassador was seconded to Damascus between 2011 and December 2021, Bahrain's embassy and the Syrian diplomatic mission in Manama have remained operational. For Bahrain, normalization with al-Assad is also a move to push back Iranian influence in Syria and the region as the Al Khalifa family also considers parts of the Shiite majority living in Bahrain as Tehran's fifth column. Therefore, closer ties between al-Assad and the Gulf states could drive a wedge between him and Iran. This comes in addition to Bahrain's goal to diversify its economic partnerships and thus its interest in creating suitable conditions in Syria to be a potential trade and investment partner.⁶⁷

Oman's Engagement in Syria

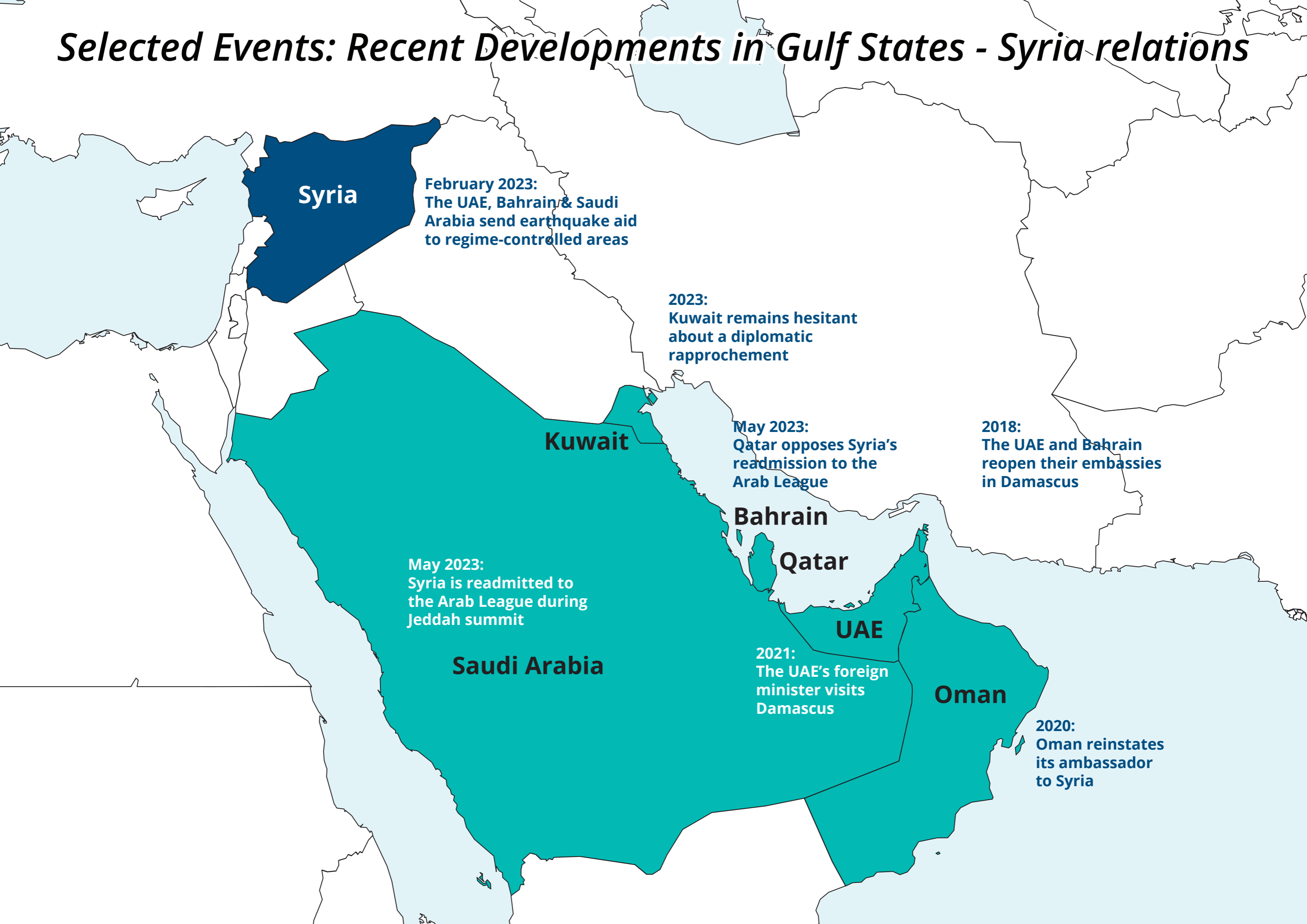
Similar to Kuwait, Oman's policy towards Syria was driven by pragmatism and neutrality. Based on Muscat's traditional diplomatic approach ("Omani-balancing"⁶⁸) to promote regional diplomacy and mediation, it did not cut diplomatic ties after the start of the Syrian war and was furthermore the first Gulf state that sent its ambassador, Turki bin Mahmood al-Busaidi, back to Syria in October 2020.⁶⁹ This approach is driven by the belief that Oman can best

advance its own security interests by not infringing on the sovereignty of other nations.⁷⁰ For instance, Oman's former foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi visited Damascus two times in 2015 and 2019, and stated that the Syrian conflict needs to be resolved diplomatically. In contrast to other Gulf states, Oman did not provide support for oppositional groups but only engaged in humanitarian terms, and refused to join calls for regime change from other Gulf states.⁷¹ After the death of "the father of the nation" Sultan Qaboos in January 2020, his successor Sultan Haitham bin Tariq continued the traditional Omani policy of non-intervention and pushed for Syria's reintegration into the AL. He also was the first Arab leader to congratulate al-Assad after his formal re-election in 2021.⁷² Furthermore, Oman's new foreign minister, Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi met al-Assad in January 2022 with the intention to prepare the ground for the upcoming normalization.⁷³ Following the earthquake in Syria in February 2023, al-Assad visited Oman for the first time since the war started and met with Sultan Haitham, which further symbolized Muscat's pragmatic stance on Syria and its commitment to normalization.⁷⁴

Due to its special relationship with Tehran, Oman is also considered a bridge between the other states and Iran vis-à-vis Syria.⁷⁵ Oman enjoys pragmatic ties with Iran, including several cooperation agreements with Tehran. As such, Oman did not cut ties with Iran after the Iranian Revolution in 1979.⁷⁶ Muscat also plays a relevant facilitating role in negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Ansar Allah, commonly known as the Houthis, to find a resolution for the Yemeni conflict. Furthermore, it supported the normalization between Israel and Egypt in 1980 and Jordan in 1994 and followed a neutral position during the Iraq-Iran war 1980-1988.⁷⁷ Sometimes defined as the "Switzerland" of the Gulf region, Oman understands neutrality as the core principle of its regional policies.⁷⁸ Oman's "talk-to-everyone" attitude became a main driver for Syria's reintegration as the leadership in Oman preserved personal ties to the al-Assad regime and served as a middleman for other Gulf states prior to official normalization.⁷⁹ Given that Oman still faces serious socioeconomic obstacles and is highly dependent on oil revenues, it aims to diversify its economic partnerships and promotes regional integration. Therefore, cooperation with neighbors such as Saudi Arabia has been promoted in the logistical, railroad and hydrogen sector. Against this backdrop, Oman also considers the reintegration of Syria as a chance for enhanced regional economic cooperation, specifically in view of energy interconnectedness and reconstruction.

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Selected Events: Recent Developments in Gulf States - Syria relations



Syria

February 2023:
The UAE, Bahrain & Saudi Arabia send earthquake aid to regime-controlled areas

Kuwait

2023:
Kuwait remains hesitant about a diplomatic rapprochement

May 2023:
Qatar opposes Syria's readmission to the Arab League

Bahrain

Qatar

2018:
The UAE and Bahrain reopen their embassies in Damascus

May 2023:
Syria is readmitted to the Arab League during Jeddah summit

Saudi Arabia

2021:
The UAE's foreign minister visits Damascus

UAE

Oman

2020:
Oman reinstates its ambassador to Syria

THE POTENTIAL AREAS OF GCC ENGAGEMENT WITH SYRIA AND SPILL-OVER EFFECTS

The Security Dimension

Regarding Syria, one driver for the Gulf states' current commitment to normalization is the drug trafficking dimension. In light of its economic diversification, the Saudi leadership believes that its ambitious economic goals cannot be reached in a turbulent region that is negatively affected by drug trafficking. Here, Syria plays a major role as it has established itself as a hub for regional drug trafficking on different levels.⁸⁰ As sanctions have taken an increasing toll on the regime, it had to find new sources of income to stay afloat.⁸¹ The drug trade generates around USD 5 billion revenue per year for the Syrian regime.⁸² Especially between 2014 and 2018, when ISIS exerted territorial control over large parts of Syria, the captagon production and trade with neighboring countries grew. From factories located inside Syria, pills are smuggled to the Gulf states via Jordan and Lebanon.⁸³ It is estimated that more than 160 groups are involved in the drug trafficking in South Syria and 36 captagon production facilities are said to exist inside the country, mainly in the provinces of Daraa and Deir az-Zur.⁸⁴ Today, the al-Assad regime and actors in neighboring Lebanon are estimated to be responsible for 86% of the captagon production in the Arab region. While normalization might reduce drug trafficking in the short run – the Syrian regime appears to have agreed in May 2023 to curb the illicit trade – it seems more likely that Damascus will fall short of resolving the problem in the long run since it is not willing to eliminate the well-established infrastructure.⁸⁵ As the Syrian regime relies heavily on drug revenues, it is unlikely that it will make any meaningful concessions to the GCC states in this regard.⁸⁶ In order to deal with such a challenge, the Gulf monarchies consider joint efforts to address drug trafficking and its regional spillover problems as an opportunity to form more robust regional initiatives. This means that more investment in infrastructure will enable and facilitate regional cooperation. On a social level, captagon consumption among parts of the Gulf population, particularly in Saudi Arabia, is growing and constitutes a major concern for economic efficiency and social cohesion.⁸⁷ Even though reliable data is lacking, Saudi Arabia is said to be the country with the highest number of captagon users in the region, yet numbers are rising in other Gulf states as well.⁸⁸ As such, normalization with Syria also addresses this kind of domestic destabilization through drug trafficking. Saudi Arabia thus aims to instrumentalize the normalization with Syria to tackle regional drug trafficking, which also poses a challenge in its complicated bilateral relations with Lebanon due to the massive influx of drugs from the

latter into the kingdom. As a consequence, bilateral relations have deteriorated as indicated by a Saudi ban on Lebanese food imports and other diplomatic cleavages.⁸⁹ In particular, Lebanon's Hezbollah with its close ties to the Syrian regime has emerged as a relevant producer of captagon that is smuggled to Saudi Arabia.⁹⁰

In addition to the drug-trafficking dimension, terrorism is a security issue that plays a crucial role in Riyadh's calculations in its normalization with Damascus. As was mentioned above, Saudi Arabia's main concern is regional instability that could affect its "Vision 2030". Terrorism and other security threats could hinder its economic diversification and development plans. Riyadh knows all too well how security vacuums in the region may function as incubators for terrorist groups. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Al-Qaeda took advantage of the regional security vacuum. In addition, Yemen's enduring failure in governance also provided al-Qaeda and the Houthis with an opportunity to establish themselves as influential players along Saudi Arabia's southern border. Finally, the rise of ISIS also undermined the security interests of the kingdom and other Gulf monarchies in Syria. The security vacuum that was filled by ISIS in Syria caused spill-over effects as more than 3,200 Saudi nationals joined the ranks of ISIS, which further concerned the Saudi leadership. The more Saudi jihadists joined ISIS, the more radical ideological thinking spread among "lonely wolves" inside the kingdom, thus increasing the risk of homegrown terrorism and terror attacks on Saudi soil.⁹¹ After the attacks of 9/11 Saudi Arabia saw a wave of terror attacks conducted by Saudi members of Al-Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In 2009, former Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Naif survived a terrorist assassination.⁹² Therefore, the Saudi ruling elite will continue to pursue transnational cooperation to cave out potential terrorist bases in the region. The Saudi leadership's attempt to establish ties and cooperate more closely with the al-Assad regime should thus be seen against the backdrop of its security interests.

Economic Relations and Green Recovery Dimension

Prior to 2011, Gulf monarchies and Syria maintained close economic relationships that deteriorated during the Syrian war. This has partially changed with the recent restoration of diplomatic ties by several GCC states. It may also be no big surprise that especially Oman and the UAE, who have started a process of warming ties with the Assad regime since 2018, have become more active economically as outlined in the case of the UAE's disclosed PV power plant project.⁹³ In general, GCC states intend

to increase their economic activities in Syria. Some of them have significant economic interests in the country, including investments in infrastructure, energy projects and trade. The continuation of the conflict, coupled with international sanctions against the Syrian government, has impacted these economic interests and hindered potential business opportunities for some GCC states. For instance, companies from Dubai and Saudi Arabia had largely been involved in the Syrian real estate sector prior to the war.⁹⁴ These connections could be revitalized. Additionally, according to the database of the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Gulf states are currently the largest exporters of petrochemical products including various forms of polymers. Saudi Arabia, in particular, plays a pivotal role in this context. In 2021, its exports to Syria amounted to approximately USD 71.9 million, with the majority consisting of ethylene polymers (58.4%), propylene polymers (20.5%), and other vinyl polymers (13.6%). In the case of the UAE, the export of petrochemicals, including plastics and rubbers, stands as the second most significant export category. Nonetheless, in 2021, it comprised only about 5% of the total exports. To date, the majority of the Emirates' exports, amounting to approximately USD 461 million, primarily consist of foodstuffs, constituting a significant share of 68.8% in 2021. Oman, being another significant trade partner, contributed approximately USD 8.71 million in 2021, primarily through the export of electric batteries, which constituted a substantial 87.4% of its exports.

Given their long-standing expertise as a global energy powerhouse, a crucial role for the Gulf states in the reconstruction of Syria's energy sector can be envisioned, particularly in the areas of power generation, transmission and distribution. As illustrated below, an energy imbalance between production and demand has been a key challenge for the country since the outbreak of the war.

GCC states can assist to expand the sector to satisfy demands and make it more efficient and climate-neutral in the future. This includes projects and initiatives that improve energy efficiency in various sectors and develop the current electrical system (e.g. construction of power stations and electrical network). Additionally, the deployment of renewable energy could increase the energy balance (on both the demand and supply side). Attempts to localize the development of renewable energy technology through the provision of manufacturing equipment and developing scientific research could also create new job opportunities for specialists from the younger generation and help to make a significant impact on Syria's reconstruction. A focus on developing a more sustainable energy system in Syria has also the additional benefit that it exploits a new niche that has not yet been occupied by other involved stakeholders like Russia or Iran.⁹⁶ Globally operating utility providers such as Saudi Arabia's ACWA Power or the UAE's Masdar Power would be able to implement those projects of a so-called green recovery where post-conflict reconstruction is aligned with sustainability measures of safeguarding the environment and tackling climate change. This would also fit into the Gulf monarchies' sustainable development agenda that has been promoted assertively over the last few years.⁹⁷ The first of its kind PV solar project, which is currently planned by the UAE, is a promising step in this direction. The Syrian Electricity Ministry and UAE companies signed a cooperation agreement to establish a 300 MW solar power station in Widyān al-Rabīe near Damascus.⁹⁸ However, finalization of the project remains uncertain due to US sanctions against Syria.⁹⁹ More initiatives and projects of similar nature can be expected if the political situation stabilizes.

Neighboring Jordan, where the Gulf monarchies have developed renewable energy projects via a

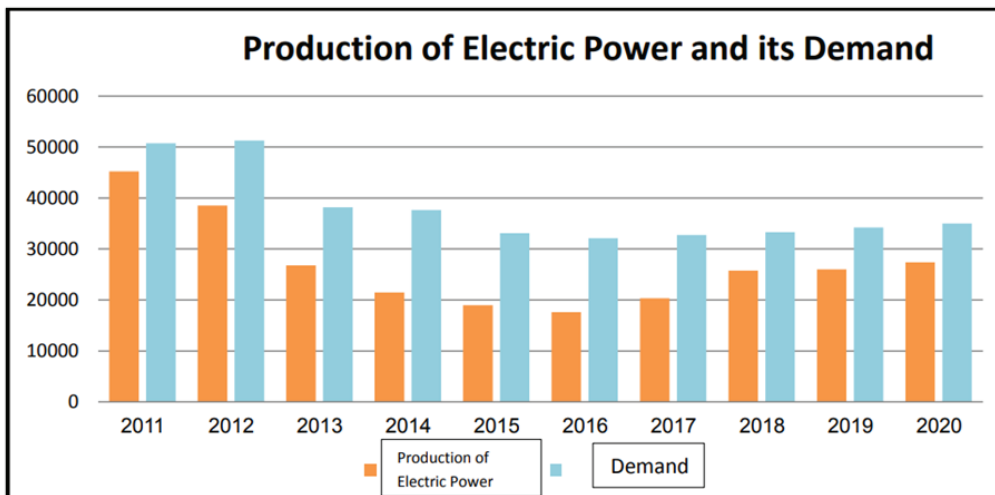


Figure 1: Syria's Electrical Power Sector⁹⁵

number of public-private partnerships (PPP) agreements can be a point of reference. Similar to Jordan, Syria is of geostrategic importance as it borders a number of countries. It thus plays an integral role in building up a regional energy system. However, unlike Jordan, greater investments are needed as many projects must be developed from scratch. In addition, as long as the Assad regime's cronyism and corruption continues, alongside the backdrop of political instability in Syria, Gulf investments in energy infrastructure are hard to achieve. Moreover, the US sanctions that are in place against Syria constitute another limiting factor. Against this backdrop, it is both an opportunity and a challenge: For the assertive Gulf monarchies, Syria is an important playing field to expand their regional influence politically and economically. Yet, when it comes to business, the Gulf states are not known to take high risks. Moreover, conducting business must be aligned with the above-mentioned Caesar Act, which applies also to any third-party (like the Gulf monarchies) that are planning to undertake investments in Syria.

The Humanitarian Dimension

For some of the GCC states, normalization with Syria is considered as a necessary step to mitigate the humanitarian catastrophe for Syrian refugees inside and outside the country. Since the beginning of the Syrian military conflict, the Gulf monarchies emerged as important providers of humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees located in the most relevant host countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.¹⁰⁰ While the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are mostly active in Jordan and Lebanon, Qatari aid organizations have also been active in Turkey and directly in Syria. The intensified close political partnership with Turkey enabled Qatar to implement projects on the ground, whereas political rifts between Turkey and Saudi Arabia as well as the UAE ruled out such cooperation despite the recent thaw in relations.¹⁰¹

Based on official data from UN OCHA's Financial Tracking (FTS), total Gulf aid to Syria (inside and outside) amounted to more than USD 664 million between 2017 and 2021. Qatar provided the most Official Development Assistance (ODA) with a volume of more than USD 322.2 million, followed by Kuwait with almost USD 155 million, the UAE with USD 101 million and Saudi Arabia with USD 86.5 million. However, no Gulf donor is obliged to provide a comprehensive data set and register their financial disbursements. In this regard, private donations or individual contributions are not taken into account as Islamic finance is not considered as ODA yet – a hot topic in international development

assistance.¹⁰² Against this backdrop, available data sets differ from each other, and ODA statistics do not represent the total amount of Gulf aid to Syrian refugees. The vast majority of the Syrian refugee aid is provided through the state development funds, the officially non-governmental Red Crescent organizations and the Islamic welfare organizations but also from private individuals or personal networks.¹⁰³ The Islamic foundations in particular are not only active within the refugee camps, but also at a decentralized level, which makes coordination with international aid organizations such as the UN more difficult.¹⁰⁴ UN officials or representatives of European aid organizations are oftentimes neither aware of the partners that Gulf Arab foundations work with, nor what form of aid they provide or through which channels.¹⁰⁵ Such an opaque situation has led to miscommunication and lack of coordination, parallel structures of aid provision and sometimes even to an oversupply of goods to refugees.¹⁰⁶

A vast share of Gulf aid was channeled to the main host countries of Syrian refugees: Between 2013 and 2017, Jordan was the fourth-largest recipient of Gulf aid¹⁰⁷ as Gulf states provided local charity and refugee organizations as well as the government with financial assistance for the more than 650,000 officially registered Syrian refugees in Jordan.¹⁰⁸ The main donor is the UAE with a total ODA of almost USD 185 million, which is due to the UAE-funded Mrajeeb Al Fhood refugee camp. In the case of Lebanon, the provision of aid was less transparent and fluid than in the case of Jordan. Due to the non-transparent funding structures of Islamic welfare institutions and other non-governmental donors, no comprehensive and coherent figures on the financial support of the Gulf monarchies for Syrian refugees in Lebanon exist.¹⁰⁹ According to the FTS, USD 186 million were provided by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar as assistance for Syrian refugees between 2016 and 2021. Hence, the share of Gulf support is only about 3.2% of all international disbursements. In recent years, Kuwait was the only Gulf state that provided aid to Syrian refugees via the Lebanese government and also generally fulfilled its obligations, which is the reason why Kuwait enjoys an outstanding and prominent position in UN statistics. Other GCC states avoided to channel aid via the government due to deep mistrust in the Lebanese governance structures. For Saudi Arabia, in particular, the growing tensions with the Lebanese government due to its relations with Iran and the ongoing cross-border drug trafficking led to a decline in humanitarian aid. For instance, KSrelief announced to stop its support for several Syrian refugee organizations located in Lebanon.¹¹⁰ In February 2016, Saudi Arabia also halted financial commitments of USD 4 billion to the

Lebanese military in order to exert pressure on the government.¹¹¹

By providing aid, the Gulf monarchies showed Islamic solidarity with Syrian refugees. They further considered their aid policy as part of their opposition to al-Assad. In addition, host countries such as Lebanon and Jordan faced enormous challenges in terms of economic and social fragility due to the growing influx of refugees. As both countries – in particular Jordan – are of utmost strategic relevance to the Gulf states, aid was provided to preserve political and economic stability. In this regard, humanitarianism has emerged as a key instrument for the externalization of aid for Syrian refugees: In order to control and restrict the influx of Syrian refugees to the Gulf, states opted for a “charity first, refugees second” policy.¹¹² None of them signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol. In most Gulf monarchies, the disparity between the relatively small proportion of Gulf nationals compared to the ever-growing foreign population plays a fundamental role in shaping the respective social contracts.¹¹³ This situation has resulted in a controversial debate about integration and exclusion, economic dependency on migrant workers and the necessary nationalization of labor markets. It furthermore spurred controversies about social stigmatization and xenophobia.¹¹⁴ Such a polarized debate touches the core of the fragile social fabric in all GCC states and is thus reflected in reserved political policies towards Syrian refugees.¹¹⁵ However, they also host a relevant number of Syrians who are allowed to integrate into the respective labor markets.¹¹⁶ According to official information, Saudi Arabia hosted 2.5 million Syrian refugees between 2011 and 2015.¹¹⁷ In Kuwait, more than 150,000 Syrians were registered in 2013, and around 240,000 Syrian nationals are said to have been accepted in the UAE in the same year.¹¹⁸ Qatar hosted 60,000 Syrians in 2015, 19,000 of whom are said to have entered Syria with a visiting visa after the beginning of the war.¹¹⁹ Gulf governments have stated that Syrians are treated as well-integrated members of the society and are enjoying the right to work as they are not considered as refugees but as “brothers and sisters in need”.¹²⁰ Yet, countries such as the UAE have integrated Syrian refugees under the existing migration sponsorship system (*kafala*) which cause potential for legal and social discrimination. Traditionally, the *kafala* system is the main instrument for the recruitment of foreign labor migrants in Gulf states but also in countries such as Jordan or Lebanon.¹²¹ Against this backdrop, Gulf states’ integration of Syrian refugees has been labeled as a “quasi-asylum policy”¹²² but real (legal) integration remains very difficult.

Finally, closer multilateral cooperation with interna-

tional organizations to support Syrian refugees is a powerful means for the GCC states to improve international reputation, which however also has its limits. While the Gulf states contribute only small amounts to the overall crowd funding of the UN agencies, they generously support specific programs and make commitments at international conferences. Such a reluctance in core funding provision is driven by a general skepticism of the Gulf monarchies towards the UN system, which has often been criticized as an inefficient and neo-colonial instrument of the West.¹²³ However, despite high pledges and a strong commitment to support Syrian refugees, actual payments have been significantly lower, which poses one of the main challenges of Gulf aid towards Syrian refugees: With the exception of Kuwait, other GCC states have only sporadically and to a lesser extent fulfilled their announced payment commitments in recent years.¹²⁴ In Turkey, the low volume could be due to the fact that the Qatari aid organizations, present and active before 2017, had to stop their work after the start of the “Gulf crisis”, as they were accused by the “blocking quartet” to support terrorist organizations.¹²⁵

In light of the ongoing normalization trend, a further decline in aid provision to host countries seems likely: Instead of assisting Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, Gulf monarchies could aim to channel more aid directly to Syria and through Damascus. In doing so, they could achieve two objectives at once: First, they could enhance humanitarian cooperation with the al-Assad regime to gain more political leverage. Second, they could instrumentalize humanitarian efforts to engage economically inside Syria and thereby circumventing the international sanctions regime. Furthermore, host countries such as Jordan also welcome the potential return of refugees to Syria in order to mitigate domestic economic and social challenges.¹²⁶ Gulf states could thus provide financial support to the al-Assad regime to promote repatriation which causes concern about the safety of returning refugees.¹²⁷ As such, the politicization of repatriation could intensify the more Gulf states are pushing for it. Still, more than 70% of Syrian refugees do not intend to return home anytime soon as they fear repression and discrimination.¹²⁸ If Gulf states would incentivize the return of refugees, xenophobic actions in countries such as Turkey or Lebanon against Syrians are likely to increase further as they are already facing deportation campaigns and raids.¹²⁹

In light of the GCC states’ reconfiguration in their relationships with the al-Assad regime, aid strategies are also shifting to push political interests and promote normalization as Syria becomes a direct recipient for humanitarian assistance. This turn in

aid policies was indicated by significant humanitarian relief provision from the Gulf monarchies to Damascus after the devastating earthquake that affected Syria and Turkey in spring 2023.¹³⁰ The catastrophe provided them with a “golden opportunity”¹³¹ to push for normalization with the al-Assad regime as part of their “earthquake diplomacy”.¹³² In particular, the UAE used the crisis as a chance to strengthen ties with al-Assad and only delivered aid to regime-controlled areas: The meeting of UAE's Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan with al-Assad in February was directly linked to Abu Dhabi's pledge of USD 100 million in assistance. Additionally, the UAE announced to send a health delegation to aid Syrian hospitals and ten ambulances¹³³, to launch initiatives to restore and maintain 40 schools and to provide laptops and desktop computers for the Tishreen University in the Latakia Governorate.¹³⁴ Similar to the UAE, Bahrain also provided aid to Assad-controlled areas and organized a USD 3.7 million public donation campaign for Turkey and Syria.¹³⁵ Manama further utilized the Nasib border crossing with Jordan to get 42 tons of medical aid into areas controlled by the Syrian regime.¹³⁶ In contrast to the UAE and Bahrain and in line with their reserved position on normalization, Qatar and Kuwait only supported areas outside of regime control. In the case of Qatar, the Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities (RACA) was coordinating a public donation campaign that raised USD 46 million for both Turkey and Syria.¹³⁷ Kuwait has pledged USD 30 million in support to both Turkey and northwest Syria and launched the donation campaign “Kuwait by your side” which raised more than USD 67.5 million to support victims in Turkey and Syria.¹³⁸ Finally, Saudi Arabia took a nuanced approach and supported both regime-controlled and non-regime-controlled areas with aid.

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CONTEXTUALIZING GCC ENGAGEMENT IN SYRIA

The Internal GCC Dimension

As of now, the GCC states policy on Syria is driven by the overarching interest to preserve regional stability and secure particular economic interests. As indicated above, the Syrian file offers a window of opportunity for enhanced Gulf coordination in terms of security cooperation, reconstruction and green recovery as well as humanitarian engagement. At the moment, the reintegration of Syria into the AL and the political and diplomatic outreach to al-Assad symbolizes the ongoing trend towards conflict management based on economic pragmatism. However, growing competition could also undermine the Gulf position on Syria. Strategic divergences between the respective regional players are not yet resolved as they mainly aim to preserve national interests instead of promoting substantial regional integration. The more the Gulf monarchies are pushing for nationalist interests, the more inner-GCC tensions are likely to re-emerge. In most of the Gulf monarchies, the ongoing economic transition is characterized by strong identity politics aimed at preserving social cohesion and resilience against external shocks. Such a nationalistic approach also entails the risk of intensified rivalries. As some states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are following similar patterns in their economic diversification efforts, they engage in similar sectors such as logistics, hydrogen production, entertainment or sports investment. As a consequence, inner-Gulf economic competition emerges while there is also the need to balance between their commitment for regional reconciliation and national aspirations. In particular Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain have to find their political and economic niches in order to realize the urgently required economic transition but also find a smart *modus operandi* with their stronger Gulf neighbors. Geopolitically, Saudi Arabia and the UAE find themselves in a position of growing rivalry in parts of their direct neighborhood and beyond. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia is concerned about the UAE's support for the secessionist movement in the South led by the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and its affiliated armed forces, as Riyadh considers the preservation of the national unity in Yemen a top priority.¹³⁹ Furthermore, the UAE has manifested its role in Yemen as it holds geostrategic locations such as in the governorates of Aden, Hadramawt, Shabwa, Ta'iz and elsewhere. In doing so, the UAE has established a maritime network to consolidate its position as a logistical champion across the region and beyond. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's aim to gain more maritime leverage in the Red Sea in order to promote the smart city NEOM as a new logistical

hub, is likely to intensify competition with the UAE in this field.¹⁴⁰ Emirati-Saudi tensions could also grow at the Horn of Africa as indicated by diverging interests in Sudan and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁴¹ Against this backdrop, the Syrian file could also emerge as a new theatre for Saudi-Emirati competition in terms of economic engagement and security cooperation. If al-Assad fails to meet the Saudi expectations to stop drug trafficking and take back Syrian refugees but engages more comprehensively with the UAE in terms of investment and trade, the Saudi leadership could reassess its strategic position on Syria. Furthermore, Qatar still takes a distanced position on Syria's reintegration as outlined above. At the moment, Qatar follows its traditional pragmatic trajectory and does not openly resist the reintegration. However, this position could change if expectations regarding Syria as a market and security partner are not met or if US-Syrian tensions intensify.

The Regional Dimension

Recently, GCC states are taking the initiative to address their security concerns from a national perspective. Moreover, as regional agency increases, certain states play growing roles in attempting to maintain regional order and stability. For example, the role of Oman given its history of having a balancing non-aligned position in the Middle East, as well as Iraq as a platform for dialogue have illuminated their positions as mediators. Iraq has transformed from being a space of Saudi-Iranian competition to an actor with agency that has become a hub of regional mediation. This became especially apparent when Baghdad hosted five rounds of direct Iran-Saudi talks prior to their diplomatic rapprochement in March 2023.¹⁴² Against this regional backdrop, Syria historically played a mediatory role between Saudi Arabia and Iran under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad, who knew how to strike a balance between the kingdom and the Islamic Republic. Conversely, Bashar al-Assad leant too much towards Iran very early on in his presidency (for reasons mentioned previously). It would thus be incorrect to assume that Syria, given its recent history, will turn away from its cooperation with Iran. Instead, Syria could aim to strike an equilibrium between both regional rivals and balance its own relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia in the foreseeable future. From a Saudi perspective, Syria could constructively contribute to the regional order if it does not obstruct Arab projects and does not significantly hinder the emergence of a new Arab order. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia aims to include Syria within its tactical conflict management with Iran in the long term.

Additionally, the Gulf states' normalization with Syria has repercussions on their contested relationship with Israel. After the 2020 "Abraham Accords" were signed between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, speculations occurred whether Saudi Arabia could also strike a formal normalization with Israel.¹⁴³ Oftentimes, this scenario is viewed through a simplistic lens that reduces the Saudi calculus to a short-term tactical approach towards regional security and negates normative and complex calculations that are driving Saudi considerations to deal with Israel. Many non-Saudi-centric analyses have reduced Saudi-Israeli relations to two simple triangularizations: First, it is argued that a Saudi-Israeli reconciliation aims to counter-balance the Iranian threat in the region.¹⁴⁴ Secondly, such a decision could also improve working and security relations between Saudi Arabia and the US.¹⁴⁵ However, both assessments overlook the complex calculation Saudi Arabia has to take into consideration before entering normalization with Israel: The current trend for cooperation rather than confrontation with Iran limits the potential for future normalization with Israel as such a step could undermine conflict management with Iran and would most likely jeopardize regional rehabilitation. Finally, Saudi Arabia's push for normalization with Syria also aims to present the kingdom as the new leader of the Arab world. Normalization with Israel may hinder that dramatically.

The International Dimension

The GCC states' normalization with Syria has strong implications on the international level particularly regarding Russia and China. Due to their long-standing history of having close ties, Russia has been significantly involved in the Syrian war. Starting in 2015, Russia has intervened militarily in the conflict and has been a staunch supporter of the al-Assad regime since then. Its intervention has included military airstrikes, deployment of troops, diplomatic support on the international stage and economic assistance.¹⁴⁶ Hence, it is not surprising that Russia is also one of the biggest investors in Syria (besides Iran). For instance, it has spent around USD 500 million on building a new port for its navy in Tartus.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, there are more than 40 existing projects on rebuilding Syria's energy infrastructure, which also includes ramping up the extraction of hydrocarbons, particularly gas exploration and the construction of gas pipelines.¹⁴⁸ Both countries, which are currently affected by sanctions from the West, aim to benefit from this economic collaboration. Overall, Russia's intervention in Syria has added another layer of complexity to the Middle East's already intricate geopolitical landscape. This also had significant implications for the Gulf states:

Russia's strong presence has created an alternative to the traditional influence of the US and its Western allies. This conflict increased further since Saudi Arabia and Qatar started to support various opposition groups in Syria. Furthermore, Russia's alliance with Iran in supporting the Syrian government has raised concerns among the Gulf monarchies about the increasing influence of Iran in the region. Given this greater complexity and threat perception, some of them, like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have attempted to engage with Russia to find common ground on regional issues. This can also be explained by the fact that both countries have significant economic ties with Russia including trade, investments and energy cooperation.

Thus, the war on Ukraine has had huge implications on the GCC states' relations with Russia. Economically, they have benefited from the war, stepping in as major energy suppliers for European countries in search of alternatives to Russian energy sources. After several years of low oil and gas prices, the global energy crisis has yielded new revenues and economic opportunities. On the international level, the war has increased the East-West division and its geopolitical implications have also been felt in the Middle East. The Gulf monarchies see the Ukraine war mainly as an internal European conflict and have adhered to their rather neutral standpoint of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries outside of the region. Therefore, they have been hesitant to align with the West in its anti-Russian measures. At the same time, the GCC states are interested in maintaining their close relationship to the West. This has been signaled through their electoral support in the UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's invasion, occupation and annexation of Ukrainian territory as well as the Jeddah summit organized by Saudi Arabia in August 2023 to discuss the Ukraine-Russia war.¹⁴⁹ Moreover, there are nuanced differences between the six Gulf states' positioning towards the conflict: Whereas Qatar and Kuwait have taken a more robust rhetorical standpoint in condemning Russia's invasion, the other four Gulf states – Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – have been more cautious in their assessment of the war. For them, Moscow has become "an increasingly important pole in a more multipolar world", which can certainly be explained by Russia's strong presence in Syria and its powerful role in the OPEC+ group.¹⁵⁰ In this regard, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have become attractive destinations for affluent Russians seeking stability outside their homeland while Western countries remain inaccessible to them.¹⁵¹ In addition, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have extended humanitarian aid to Ukraine, provided diplomatic support and played a significant role in securing the release of Western and Ukrainian detainees held by

Russia, which earned them appreciation from Western nations. Their confidence in their economic power and leverage deters rising concerns about the possibility of Western secondary sanctions.¹⁵² It is a further proof of the Gulf monarchies' ongoing assertiveness.

In Syria, as in other conflicts, China largely adhered to its policy of non-interference. In this regard, it has not been military active and has refrained from directly supporting any particular warring party. It has also expressed its opposition to foreign military intervention and called for respect for Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, China did provide humanitarian assistance and has supported UN-led efforts to find a peaceful resolution to the conflict through negotiations. China and Syria have maintained economic and trade relations and China has continued to engage in economic projects in Syria. However, the scale of China's economic involvement in Syria is relatively limited compared to other major players in the region. Concrete projects include the construction of an industrial park in 2017.¹⁵³ Furthermore, in 2022, Syria joined China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI).¹⁵⁴ Until today, however, China's engagement in Syria is shaped by talk and rhetoric rather than implementation.¹⁵⁵

For most of the Gulf monarchies, China has emerged as the most important trade partner in recent years. They consider constructive political and economic ties with China as a top priority to balance relations with the US, diversify partnerships in a multipolar world and enhance economic growth. Furthermore, China's facilitating role in the Iran-Saudi reconciliation also features prominently in Beijing's goal to play a more dominant political role in the Gulf region.¹⁵⁶ Against this backdrop, Gulf monarchies are going to watch carefully how China will position itself towards Syria. From an economic perspective, opportunities for joint projects in Syria could improve after normalization which also supports the GCC states' efforts to expand economic activities and strengthen ties with China on all levels. Nevertheless, due to a limited Chinese role in Syria, real options for mutual Sino-Gulf cooperation remain vague at the moment. Furthermore, Gulf monarchies need to balance their economic engagement in Syria with their relations to the US. As long as the Caesar Act is still in place, investments in Syria remain under sanctions, which could also hamper GCC states from enhanced economic ties with Syria, and/or Russia and China in Syria.¹⁵⁷ Despite the fact that relations between the US and some Gulf monarchies such as Saudi Arabia are currently characterized by tensions, they are still strongly aligned with the US on an economic, political, and military level. Therefore, GCC states have to calculate the costs of a growing engagement in Syria with respect to their

relations with Washington.¹⁵⁸ In this regard, the leadership in some Gulf states may hope for a win of Donald Trump in the upcoming US presidential elections as he enjoys closer ties to Saudi Arabia and the UAE than President Joe Biden. Trump may thus initiate a turnaround in the anti-Assad US policy on Syria indicated by the lifting of sanctions on Syria. In such a scenario, the GCC states could intensify their efforts to economically engage with Syria.

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CONCLUSION

The Gulf states' normalization with the al-Assad regime in Syria show a mixed record at best: Some Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE are pushing for normalization hoping to improve the regional security situation, reduce drug trafficking, and seek economic cooperation. In light of regional de-escalation and reconciliation, their approach on Syria is mainly driven by business and security interests and a pragmatic opportunism in order to reduce regional tensions, manage conflicts and balance the regional power play. As they are mainly interested in economic and partnership diversification in a multipolar world, the al-Assad regime has recently become a thorn in the side of some Gulf monarchies, which needs to be controlled.

However, real opportunities for closer cooperation remain grim: First and foremost, the al-Assad regime is not considered as a trustworthy partner. Secondly, the Gulf states do not act in a unified manner as Qatar still opposes the reintegration of Syria into the AL. Thirdly, the Gulf states watch the ongoing internal protests in parts of Syria with great concern.¹⁵⁹ Still, no long-term solution for the roots of the war is at sight as the al-Assad regime continues to act in a brutal way to repress opposition. Therefore, new waves of protests indicate the fragility of the Syrian stability which also undermines Gulf interests. Finally, US sanctions are still in place and reduce options for Gulf states to invest in Syria to a minimum. As a consequence, the Gulf states' engagement with Syria is mainly driven by a calculation of pragmatic necessity, yet a comprehensive and sustainable strategic approach is still lacking. Developments thus need to be considered as a transactional step towards greater conflict management and regional agency.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: Significant Gulf states steps towards normalization with the al-Assad regime

Oman	October 2015	Visit of former Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi to Syria
	July 2019	Visit of former Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi to Syria
	October 2020	Nomination of ambassador Turki bin Mahmood al-Busaidi to Syria
	May 2021	Sultan Haitham bin Tariq congratulates al-Assad for his formal reelection
	January 2022	Meeting between Foreign Minister Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi and al-Assad
	March 2023	Meeting between Sultan Haitham bin Tariq and al-Assad
Bahrain	December 2018	Reopening of Bahrain’s embassy in Damascus
	June 2021	Nomination of ambassador Waheed Mubarak Sayyar to Syria
UAE	December 2018	Reopening of the UAE’s embassy in Damascus
	October 2021	Establishment of the Syrian-Emirati Joint Businessmen Council
	November 2021	Visit of UAE’s Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed al-Nahyan to Syria
	November 2021	Participation of Syrian delegation in EXPO 2020
	March 2022	Meeting between Muhammad bin Zayid and al-Assad in the UAE
	February 2023	Visit of UAE’s Foreign Minister Abdullah Bin Zayed al-Nahyan to Syria
	March 2023	Meeting between Muhammad bin Zayid and al-Assad in the UAE
	May 2022	UAE invites al-Assad to participate in COP28
Saudi Arabia	January 2021	Saudi holds a GCC summit in Al-Ula signaling a Saudi intention of adapting a de-escalation approach to the region
	February 2023	Saudi Arabia sends humanitarian aid to the regions devastated by the earthquake
	April 2023	- Saudi foreign minister visits Syria in the first diplomatic trip since 2011 - Both states agree to normalize relations with each other
	May 2023	Saudi Arabia hosts the AL summit where it suggested to re-introduce Syria back into the AL
Kuwait	January/February 2023	Kuwait sends humanitarian aid to the regions devastated by the earthquake
	April 2023	Kuwait denies reports that foreign minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al Jaber Al Sabah will visit Syria
Qatar	May 2023	Qatar joins the AL summit, but Emir Tamim leaves before Assad’s speech, signaling his rejection of normalization with Assad

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