

Rebels, drugs, refugees: How Syria plans to regain legitimacy

written by Elie Klutstein | 24.07.2024

Last week, Syrian citizens went to the polls for a genuine democratic celebration. For the fourth time since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, they were asked to elect their representatives to the parliament in Damascus. But don't worry: these are not really free and fair elections, and no one expects any major surprises.

Firstly, residents under rebel or Kurdish control are not allowed to vote. They likely do not have access to polling stations set up by the regime anyway. Additionally, Syrians in the diaspora – like refugees who fled the country during the civil war – cannot cast their votes.

More importantly, the regime is suspected of having complete control over the results. For example, in the previous elections in 2020, the final results were delayed due to “technical failures,” and in the end, the regime won 166 out of 250 seats in the parliament. Just one seat short of two-thirds of the seats. Although the Syrian regime is popular in the country, this still seems excessive.

The absolute control over the elections allows the long-time president, Bashar al-Assad, to promote his personal interests. While the residents are mainly concerned about the crumbling Syrian economy, Assad wants to secure a majority in the parliament that will allow him to change the constitution and extend his rule, which is currently limited until 2028 “only.” He has been in office since 2000, as a reminder.

Assad, who is under US sanctions and has an arrest warrant against him in France due to the chemical attacks his army carried out during the civil war, is holding the elections in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. In 2015, the council issued Resolution 2254, which stipulated that elections would be held in Syria only as part of a comprehensive solution to the internal conflict. It also added other criteria for holding the elections – which the regime has ignored until today – including UN supervision, allowing Syrians abroad to vote, and the “significant” participation of women in the electoral process.

What enables Assad to act so calmly towards a Security Council decision? Perhaps

he draws confidence from the fact that in the past year, and especially recently, he is increasingly solidifying his place as a member of the Arab nations' family.

In November, Assad participated in an Arab League summit in Riyadh that dealt with the war in Gaza, and even gave a speech there. After many years, more than a decade, of regional diplomatic isolation, Syria was invited back to the Arab League two years ago, and Assad seized the opportunity. Even before that, in May 2023, he attended the league's summit in Jeddah and said he hoped his invitation to the event, for the first time since 2011, "marks the beginning of a new phase in Arab action for solidarity among us."

Not only has the league as a whole approached Assad, but individual countries have as well. Jordan was one of the countries that pushed for Syria's reintegration into the Arab world, and even promoted a joint plan – despite American opposition – to minimize the effects of the decade-long conflict. Jordan presented the plan to another Arab country, Saudi Arabia, which agreed to take part in it.

Indeed, the plan gained momentum: last week, Saudi Arabia renewed regular commercial flights from Damascus to its territory, after the first flight took off in May from the Syrian capital to bring pilgrims from the country to the Hajj in Mecca. Last year, Iraq's prime minister visited Damascus for the first time since 2010, and relations between the two countries are constantly improving.

Iraq, along with Egypt, was also one of the mediators between Syria and another non-Arab country, Turkey. After long negotiations and discussions, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced two weeks ago that he wanted to restore relations with Damascus and "return them to their previous state." The leaders of Turkey and Syria – two countries that have been bitter rivals over the past decade against the backdrop of the civil war and the war against the Kurds – once enjoyed a friendship and even vacationed together with their families.

Erdogan's rapprochement attempt may also be the background for his announcement, a few days later, of the imminent end of the military operation he launched in April 2022 against Kurdish rebel organizations in Turkey and Syria. The Turkish president, of course, justified this by saying he had managed to neutralize the Kurdish threat, but the timing remains somewhat suspicious.

Assad, for his part – used to being the bad boy of the neighborhood – does not respond so easily to Erdogan. He may hold a grudge against him for years of

occupying territories in Syria, supporting rebels against his rule, and more. He said in response to Erdogan's offer that he would agree to meet, but "only if core issues are discussed." What does that mean? Probably the end of Turkey's military presence in northern Syria, among other things.

Another non-Arab country has been at the center of Syrian affairs recently: Iran. After Masoud Pezghkian's victory in the presidential elections in Tehran, Assad was one of the first leaders to call and congratulate him. A few days later, Pezghkian called him back to discuss advancing bilateral relations, implementing their agreements, and other issues on the agenda.

A Family Business

What has led to the thawing of relations between Assad and the region's leaders? How is it possible that after more than a decade of being ostracized, isolated, and being the neighborhood bully that no one approaches - suddenly he is warmly welcomed?

The English proverb says, "If you can't beat them, join them." That's roughly what happened here too. After Arab countries tried to isolate Syria but the bad boy only caused more trouble, they are trying a different approach: instead of the stick, they are now going for the carrot.

The Assad regime causes two main problems in the region: the first is the refugees, hundreds of thousands of Syrians who fled their country following the civil war since 2011 and flooded neighboring countries, and from there also moved to European and North African countries. This flow has not stopped, and some still think that perhaps they can be returned to their country through various initiatives, and that the regime in Damascus can help with that.

The second problem, no less significant, is the extensive drug trade that the Damascus regime has been engaged in in recent years, causing havoc throughout the Middle East. Yes, the butcher from Damascus, the compassionate ophthalmologist who slaughtered hundreds of thousands of his people, is also not deterred by widespread drug distribution and profiting from it. Surprising, isn't it?

The main drug the regime distributes is Captagon, also sold under the name Fenethylline. It is a synthetic stimulant initially created to treat attention deficit

disorders, narcolepsy, and more, and is considered highly addictive. It is so addictive that its use was discontinued, and it was classified as a dangerous drug. Throughout the Arab world, religious decrees have been issued against its use due to the danger involved.

During its years of isolation, the Assad regime, desperate for cash flow, began producing and exporting the substance. Indeed, the drug trade has yielded billions of dollars for the Syrians. In 2021, the regime reportedly earned nearly \$6 billion (!) from this trade - a third of Israel's defense budget last year, not including American aid money. The Syrians have become so "addicted" to this field that it is believed they are responsible for about 80 percent of the global supply of Captagon. According to official data, the value of this amount is three times the total trade of all the Mexican cartels combined. All this goodness Dr. Assad freely supplies to the world.

These drugs are transferred to terrorist organizations, including Palestinian ones, which sell them and generate significant revenue. It is claimed that Hezbollah is also involved in the production and distribution of the drug, although Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Shiite organization, previously denied his group's involvement in drug distribution. "If we were earning billions, I would probably notice," he said. He probably forgot about his group's involvement in the drug trade in South America. People forget sometimes, it happens.

Captagon is often associated, especially in the Middle East, with use by terrorist operatives. It is claimed that they use it as a stimulant before carrying out attacks. After the horrors of the October 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel, it was claimed that some Hamas terrorists were found with Captagon, but this claim was not substantiated.

One of the countries most severely affected by these smuggling activities is Jordan, which constantly fights groups of smugglers trying to bring the dangerous drug into its territory. Earlier this year, the Jordanians even began directly attacking smugglers across the border in an attempt to disrupt their activities. But Amman is not alone in the battle: the Emirates have also thwarted large-scale smuggling operations worth hundreds of millions of dollars in Captagon, and Iraq has also seized shipments of the addictive substance. Just last month, Jordan foiled a smuggling attempt of 9.5 million Captagon pills destined for Saudi Arabia.

This, then, may be the background for the recent rapprochement between Syria and some of the region's countries. The issue is still sensitive, and Damascus is required to answer questions about drug distribution. When it failed to do so, there was even a retreat in its rapprochement with Arab countries, and its participation in an Arab summit last year was canceled.

Incidentally, one country still vehemently opposed to Syria's reintegration into the Arab family, is Qatar. Some believe the reason is the Qatari regime's desire to maintain its ties with the US and the fear that supporting Assad could alienate the Americans from Doha. On the other hand, it may be related to Qatar's connections with various rebel groups in northern Syria and their desire to continue nurturing them and establishing a foothold in the country.

However, a significant question that remains open is whether Assad is even willing and able to fight drug smuggling and the spread of refugees from his country. Regarding drugs, it is important to note that it is not just a profit for the regime as a whole, but for the Assad family itself. The tyrant's hands in Damascus are deeply involved in the drug trade: the president's younger brother, Maher, who commands a division in the Syrian army, is a key figure in drug distribution. The European Union has imposed sanctions on two of Assad's cousins due to suspicion that they are also involved in the distribution of Captagon. A family business.

A Final Word on Israel

As far as is known, Captagon is not widely distributed in Israel, although suspects have been caught en route to the country with the drug, and there have also been shipments intercepted by authorities on their way to Gaza. However, besides the addiction risk, as mentioned, this drug can also be used by terrorist organizations to strengthen themselves, including Hezbollah and the Syrian regime. Yet, experts estimate that the fight against drug distribution could serve Israel as another channel through which it can integrate into the regional landscape. Israel might contribute its security capabilities, even intelligence, in its relations with Jordan, the Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, to try to thwart smuggling and make the entire Middle East a slightly cleaner place. Who knows, maybe salvation for Israel will come from Assad in the end.

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