



Assad gets warm welcome as Syria welcomed back into AL

Syrian president hopes for 'new phase' in Arab cooperation

International Desk

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad voiced hope Friday for a new era of Arab cooperation as his country was welcomed back to the Arab League after more than a decade of suspension. "I hope that it marks the beginning of a new phase of Arab action for solidarity among us, for peace in our region, development and prosperity instead of war and destruction," Assad said in a speech to his first Arab summit in 13 years. The Arab rapprochement with Assad gained momentum after China negotiated an agreement in March that saw Riyadh resume diplomatic ties with Iran.

A flurry of diplomatic activity has been underway in recent weeks after the decision by Saudi Arabia and Iran to resume ties shifted the political landscape. "We are holding this summit in a turbulent world," Assad said. But "hope grows" in the light of the rapprochements between Arab states which "culminate in this summit," Assad said. Assad thanked Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman "for the great role he played and the intense efforts he exerted to promote reconciliation in our region". Assad said Syria would always belong to the Arab world but called for non-interference in the

internal affairs of Arab states. "It is important to leave internal affairs to the country's people as they are best able to manage their own affairs," he said. Crown Prince Mohammed said he hoped Syria's "return to the Arab League leads to the end of its crisis," 12 years after Arab states suspended Syria as it descended into a war that has killed more than 350,000 people. Saudi Arabia would "not allow our region to turn into a field of conflicts", he said, saying the page had been turned on "painful years of struggle". Earlier this month, Saudi Arabia and Syria said their embassies will resume work more than a

decade after they were closed. Last month, Assad met in Damascus with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the first such visit since the war broke out in 2011. The Arab League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011, when the country launched a campaign to weed out the most violent militants trickling into the country from around the world. Saudi Arabia was formerly key backer of armed militant groups attempting to overthrow the Syrian government. However, in recent months, Riyadh has called for dialogue to end the conflict that has killed half a million people and displaced half of

Syria's pre-war population. Washington has objected to any steps towards normalization with Syria, saying there must first be progress towards a political solution to the conflict. Ahead of the summit, the US State Department reiterated opposition to normalization of relations with Damascus and said sanctions should not be lifted. "The Americans are dismayed. We (Persian Gulf states) are people living in this region, we're trying to solve our problems as much as we can with the tools available to us in our hands," said a Persian Gulf source close to government circles, Reuters reported.



Syria's President Bashar al-Assad (2nd L) and leaders of Arab countries pose for a family photo ahead of the start of the 32nd Arab League Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on May 19, 2023. **● BANDAR AL-JALUD/SAUDI ROYAL PALACE/AFP**

Assad's overwhelming presence at Arab League summit



By Amir Mousavi
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EXCLUSIVE
Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made a noteworthy arrival in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on Thursday, gracing the Arab League summit with his presence as a special guest. Media reports suggest that he is scheduled to hold talks with King Salman of Saudi Arabia. Assad's attendance at the Arab League meeting, following an 11-year hiatus, conveys a significant message: Arab nations have redirected their attention toward Damascus and the Syrian president, rather than solely focusing on Syria's representation within the bloc. Assad's triumphant presence in Jeddah symbolizes a remarkable culmination of 12 years of steadfastness against both external and internal pressures, as well as relentless attacks. Standing alongside the loyal armed forces and a considerable portion of

the Syrian populace, Assad, backed by his regional allies, has resolutely withstood foreign pressure spearheaded by the United States, Israel, and certain Arab nations. The respect extended to Syria by Arab countries stands as a tangible outcome of this unwavering stance. Moreover, the normalization of relations between Arab nations and Syria serves as a resounding testament to the failure of American policies on Syria and the wider region. In recent weeks, despite the Americans' concerted efforts, including visits to Saudi Arabia and engaging in extensive calls and consultations, they ultimately fell short in preventing Assad's participation in the Jeddah meeting. Arab nations, led by Saudi Arabia, appear to have come to a profound understanding about their previous misjudgments concerning regional developments. They now acknowledge that fostering cooperation and understanding among regional nations is the primary

solution to enhancing security and promoting the advancement and prosperity of the region, rather than relying on external actors. This newfound approach found its genesis in the Riyadh-Tehran agreement for rapprochement, which is anticipated to gradually address other prevailing issues in the region. It holds the potential to alleviate the ongoing conflict in Yemen and change the circumstances in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon for the better through regional engagement. The emerging reality in the Middle East is that the United States no longer wields any significant influence here. Hence, the reintegration of Syria into the Arab League, coupled with Assad's presence at the summit and the Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement, marks a pivotal juncture in the West Asia region, promising a future defined by cooperation rather than confrontation. Regrettably, certain foreign media outlets failed to acknowledge Assad's victorious and command-

ing presence at the Jeddah summit. In an attempt to undermine its significance and water down the primary message, they chose to emphasize a narrative suggesting that Syria's return to the Arab League signifies a distancing from Iran and the resistance front. Such assertions, however, disregard the fact that Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, that opposed Assad over the past 12 years, engaged with Iran even prior to détente with Syria. The agreement between Tehran and Riyadh to restore diplomatic ties was, in fact, sealed before any other developments. Assad, well aware of the nations that stood with the Syrian government and its people as friends during arduous times, can easily identify them. Over the past years, numerous coalitions emerged in the West Asian region, yet the only alliance that persevered and remained in place was the resistance front centered on Iran and Syria as the standard-bearer.

China renews criticism of Western arms sales to Ukraine

China's Deputy Permanent U.N. Representative Geng Shuang again criticized Western arms sales to Ukraine, saying it would only lead to escalation, more civilian casualties and displacement, and make it harder to obtain a ceasefire and start peace negotiations. China says it does not and will not provide arms to either side in the Ukraine conflict, a point Geng reiterated at a Security Council meeting Thursday, according to AP. "The constant feeding of weapons to the battlefield will ... also pose serious challenges to post-war reconstruction and, if such weapons are diverted to terrorists or armed groups, likely cause new turmoil in a wider geographic area," Geng was cited as saying on the U.N.'s website. "All parties should promote a political settlement with sincerity and urgency and create conditions conducive to a ceasefire," Geng added. China says it is a neutral party and wants to help broker an end to the 15-month-old conflict. Beijing released a peace plan in February but Ukraine's allies largely dismissed it, insisting that Russian President Vladimir Putin must withdraw his forces. The West has supplied Ukraine with billions of euros in military aid, including long-range missiles, artillery, tanks and drones, since the war began in February. The United States is by far the largest contributor of military aid to Kyiv, followed by the UK and the EU.



● REUTERS

NEWS IN BRIEF

Over 100 dead in Nigeria clashes

AFP - More than 100 people in central Nigeria died in several days of inter-communal violence that have destroyed hundreds of homes and caused thousands to flee, local officials said on Friday. The clashes between cattle herders and farming communities in Plateau State are the worst in years in a region that has long struggled with ethnic and religious tensions and reprisal attacks. The death toll from attacks by gunmen on farming villages in and around the district of Mangu since the start of the week has passed 100, after earlier reports said 85 people were killed, a local official said.

South Korean nurses on strike over pay



REUTERS - Tens of thousands of South Korean nurses went on strike on Friday after President Yoon Suk Yeol vetoed a law to improve their pay and working conditions amid protests from doctors and nursing assistants who said the bill would hurt their jobs. The bill passed the opposition-led parliament last month, prompting protests from some medical workers who said the new law would open the door for nurses to provide treatment without a medical license. Nurses say that the doctors' claim is groundless, and that the country needs more care centres to cope with its rapidly aging population.

Over 1 million displaced by Sudan crisis: UN

REUTERS - More than a million people have been displaced by fighting in Sudan so far, including a quarter of a million refugees, a U.N. Refugee Agency (UNHCR) spokesperson said on Friday. The army and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces have been locked in weeks of conflict that has killed hundreds of people and turned the streets of the capital Khartoum into war zones. The latest figure includes some 843,000 people displaced internally and around 250,000 people who have fled across Sudan's borders, U.N. refugee agency spokesperson Matthew Saltmarsh told a Geneva briefing.