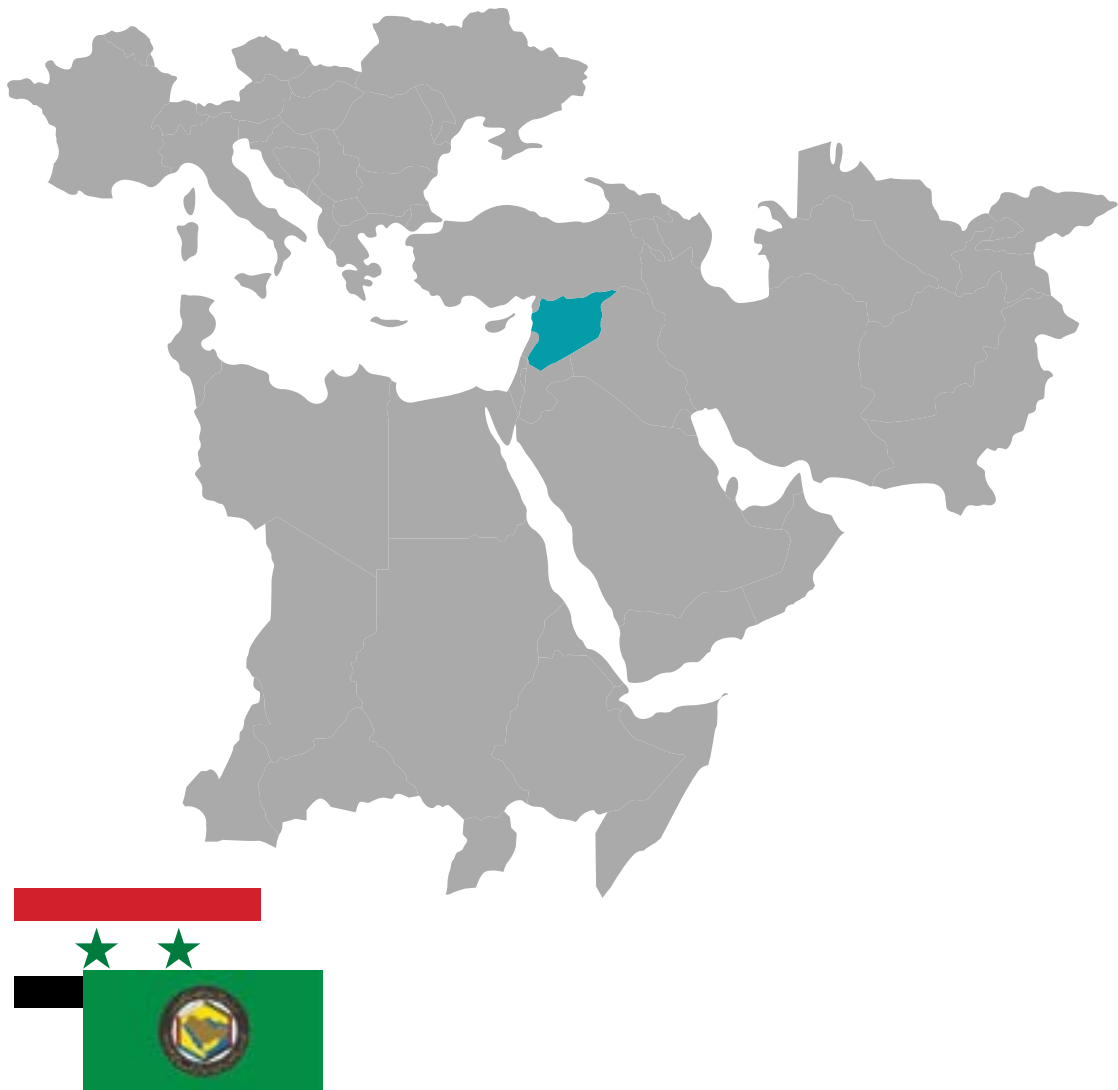


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Syria - GCC Relations



Key Domestic Developments

Syria continues to grapple with multifaceted domestic challenges amidst the ongoing civil war that, in 2024, entered its 13th year. The country's domestic policy is deeply intertwined with efforts to navigate the aftermath of the war and sanctions that wreaked havoc on the economy, address humanitarian crises, and pursue national rehabilitation. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, secured yet another term in the presidential election in May 2021, earning him another 7 years of power, although he has held the position since July 2000, raising concern over the legitimacy of the elections taking place in the country.

The economy of Syria took a major hit under U.S. and European sanctions when beginning in April 2011 any export or sale/supply of goods or services to Syria was banned. The country has struggled to remain afloat as the value of the Syrian pound continues to fall. At the end of 2023, the Syrian currency had fallen to its lowest ever, at 14,000 SYP to the dollar—a 130% loss of value compared to the beginning of the year. The leadership in Damascus has tried to address the issue by increasing the public sector salaries and pumping more banknotes into the market, but this increase in supply has only compounded inflation.

Domestic policy in Syria remains focused on consolidating control over key territories while engaging in diplomatic initiatives aimed at bolstering international support and reconstruction efforts. However, the presence of foreign military forces and ongoing tensions with various opposition groups complicate efforts to achieve lasting stability. As of January 2023, the Syrian opposition controlled 37% of Syrian territories. Against this backdrop of ongoing resistance and the presence of sanctions, the Syrian government faces the daunting task of balancing security concerns with the imperative of fostering inclusive governance and addressing the needs of its population.

Since the start of the war in 2011, the humanitarian crisis has been dire, with over 60% of the population having been displaced and lacking the most basic necessities like food, clean drinking water, and access to education and healthcare. The situation was made worse when in 2023, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit parts of Syria displacing thousands more people and taking the lives of over 5,000. Still, over a year since the earthquake hit, the country and its people have seen little reconstruction or easing of their dire living situation, living amidst rubble and demolition resulting from earthquake damage atop destruction from years of war.

According to U.N. statistics, 90% of Syrians are living below the poverty line, causing many to resort to extreme measures like sending their young children to work instead of to school. Further undermining the already desperate situation in Syria is the growing trade of illicit drugs. The economic crisis resulting from the war coupled with the country's international isolation created a political vacuum whereby the production, consumption, and trade of the narcotic, Captagon, gained popularity. Approximately 80% of the world's supply of Captagon comes out of Syria and although the government denies having any involvement in the smuggling of the drug, leaders in the U.S., the EU, and the United Kingdom have referred to it as a "billion-dollar...regime-led business model, enriching the inner circle of the regime and providing it with revenue that contributes to its ability to maintain its policies of repression against the civilian population."

Key Economic and Social Data GDP: 8,969.51 (2021)

GDP Per Capita: 744.67 (2021)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.3% (2021)

Population: 22.1 million (2022)

Unemployment Rate: 9.61% (2022)

Credit Rating: S&P-; Moody-A1; Fitch-A+

Foreign Policy

Key Foreign Policy Initiatives

Syria's foreign policy initiatives are deeply influenced by its ongoing civil conflict and the complex web of international actors involved in the region. The Syrian government continues to prioritize strategic alliances with countries such as Russia and Iran, which have provided crucial military, financial, and diplomatic support throughout the conflict and have enabled Syria to maintain its grip on power and resist international pressure for regime change.

At the same time, Syria remains a focal point for regional and global powers with divergent interests, including the United States, Turkey, Israel, and various Gulf states. Competition for influence in Syria has led to proxy conflicts and geopolitical maneuvering, further complicating efforts to rehabilitate the country, let alone resolve the crisis. Syria was caught in the crossfire when on April 1, 2024, Israeli airstrikes hit the Iranian consulate in Damascus killing several Revolutionary Guard officers from Iran. Israel has acknowledged carrying out strikes in Syria against what it considers Iran's "military entrenchment" and weapons shipments to groups that Israel considers to be terrorist organizations. Iran however has argued that the presence of its Revolutionary Guards in Syria is



for council and support for the Assad regime as it continues to fight opposition forces in its civil war.

Recent foreign policy initiatives have centered on diplomatic engagement with key stakeholders, but ongoing sanctions placed on Syria by the West have been a major obstacle, standing in the way of the country moving forward. Some signs of returns to normalcy include Syria being re-admitted into the Arab League in May 2023 after years of isolation due to the ongoing conflict and condemnation by the Arab states over the Al-Assad regime's response to the opposition and maltreatment of civilians. Yet most of the Arab states have accepted that the Al-Assad regime has remained victorious over the opposition, and in efforts to unify and stabilize the region, have chosen to accept Syria back into the fold. However, progress has been slow and often stymied by ongoing violence, mistrust, and divergent objectives among the parties involved, including in regard to other regional conflicts.

In summary, Syria's foreign policy initiatives reflect the country's efforts to navigate a complex geopolitical landscape while seeking to safeguard its sovereignty, protect its interests, and secure a favorable outcome in the 13-year-old conflict. However, the entrenched nature of the crisis and the involvement of multiple international actors make achieving a lasting resolution a formidable challenge.



Syria Trade in Goods with GCC Countries (USD millions) 2021/2022

Source: OEC

Country	Exports	Imports	Balance of Trade
Bahrain	1.46	8.52	-7.06
Kuwait	6.33	114	-107.67
Oman	5.31	7.65	-2.34
Qatar	3.98	116	-112.02
Saudi Arabia	313	71.9	241.1
United Arab Emirates	51.9	453	-401.1
GCC Total Amount	381.98	771.07	-389.09

Establishment of Diplomatic Relations:

Bahrain: January 23, 1975

Kuwait: October 24, 1963

Oman: December 19, 1987

Qatar: January 19, 1972

Saudi Arabia: June 26, 1944

United Arab Emirates: January 19, 1972

Key Research Centers and Think Tanks

[Syrian Center for Policy Research](#)

[Syrian Center for Statistics and Research](#)

Key Regional Experts

Dr. Ahmed Salim Al-Barsan

Dr. Sumer Mounir Saleh

George Sabra

[Lina Khatib](#)

[Charles Lister](#)

[Erwin Van Ween](#)

[Assaad Al-Achi](#)

[Carsten Wieland](#)

Key Recent Literature

[Nanar Hawach, "How Iran Seeks to Exploit the Gaza War in Syria's Volatile East," International Crisis Group, May 10, 2024](#)

[Malcolm H. Kerr, "Why Iranian Entrenchment in Southern Syria Worries Neighboring Countries," March 21, 2024](#)

[Mackenzie Holtz, "Examining Extremism: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham \(HTS\)" August 3, 2023](#)

Key Developments in Syria-GCC Relations

Aside from accepting Syria back into the Arab League and re-establishing relations with the



Syrian leadership, the Gulf countries have generally accepted the Assad regime as victorious and, for the sake of regional stability, have decided to mend fences. In general, the GCC states have held varying degrees of support for Syria, with some holding more firm stances against the regime (i.e. Saudi Arabia and the UAE). Ongoing conflicts throughout the broader Middle East and Syrian ties with Iran and Russia have prompted the Gulf states to choose unity over divergence, although there is still much to improve in the relationship between the two sides.

Syria-Saudi Arabia

- In 2024, Saudi Arabia appointed the first charge d'affaires to Syria since 2012. Abdullah Al-Haris began work in February restoring the Saudi embassy and will oversee consular services in Damascus.
- On December 24, 2023, Riyadh received the newly appointed Syrian ambassador to the Kingdom, H.E. Ayman Soussan.
- Saudi Arabia invited Syrian President Bashar Al Assad to attend the Arab League Summit meeting held in Jeddah on May 19, 2023, as part of Syria's re-entry into the League.
- In May 2023, Saudi Arabia and Syria renewed their diplomatic relations after a long break in



ties following the Syrian civil war.

- Saudi Foreign Minister H.H. Prince Faisal bin Farhan visited Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in Damascus on April 18, 2023, to discuss the "importance of having an Arab leadership role in efforts to end the crisis [in Syria]," according to the Saudi Foreign Ministry.
- On April 12, 2023, Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Mekdad, visited Saudi Arabia in the first official visit between the two countries since 2011. In meetings held with Saudi Foreign Minister H.H. Faisal bin Farhan, the two leaders discussed efforts to reach a political solution to the crisis in Syria that would ensure the return of Syrian refugees to Syria and contribute to unity, security, and stability in Syria and the broader region.

Syrian - United Arab Emirates

- In January 2024, the United Arab Emirates named its first ambassador to Syria since the start of the Syrian civil war. H.E. Hassan Ahmad Al-Shihi took his post in Damascus on January 30, 2024.
- On March 19, 2023, President Al-Assad visited the UAE. He and his wife were received by Emirati President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The meeting was held after the UAE supported Syria's earthquake relief efforts by contributing relief planes and other aid to the country.

Syria-Qatar

- During the 55th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, held in February/March 2024, the second secretary of Qatar's Permanent Mission, Abdullah bin Ali Behzad pressured the international community to address the human rights violations and war crimes committed by the Al-Assad regime against the Syrian people.
- In September 2023, Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani stated during the UN

General Assembly: “It is not permissible to condone the gross injustice that has befallen the brotherly Syrian people...the crisis is still awaiting a comprehensive settlement through a political process leading to a political transition.”

- While other Gulf states normalized relations with Syria, Qatar has continued to reject such rapprochement. According to statements by Qatar’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson Majed bin Mohammad Al-Ansari, “The official position of the State of Qatar on normalization with the Syrian regime is a decision linked...to progress in the political solution that fulfills the aspirations of the Syrian people.”
- In July 2023, Qatar’s Prime Minister Mohammad bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani stated that his country’s boycott of the Syrian regime remains in place. This stance, however, did not deter Qatar from voting in solidarity with other Arab states to allow Damascus back into the Arab League, citing that it would not pose an obstacle to their reinstatement in hopes that its re-entry into the League would “encourage the Syrian government to take positive steps toward addressing its people’s issues...and improving its relations with neighboring Arab states.”

Syria-Kuwait

- In May 2023, Kuwait contributed \$17 million in aid support for people in Syria and Türkiye following the devastating earthquake that hit the region.
- Kuwait has had reservations about re-establishing ties with Syria, yet it opted to defer the decision to admit Damascus back into the Arab League rather than oppose it.

Syria-Oman

- In February 2023, Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad visited Oman for his first foreign visit since the start of the Syrian civil war, and following the earthquakes that shook Syria and Türkiye. During the visit, Al-Assad met with Oman’s Sultan Haitham bin Tariq to discuss normalization of ties with the Arab Gulf countries.
- In July 2022, a joint Syria-Oman business council was established in order to enhance economic cooperation between the two countries.
- Oman was the first Gulf country to reinstate its ambassador to Syria on October 5, 2020.

Syria-Bahrain

- On April 28, 2024, President Bashar Al-Assad received Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Abdul Latif bin Rashid Al-Zayani to Damascus, marking the first visit by a Bahraini official to Syria since the start of the Syrian civil war. The two leaders discussed ways to develop bilateral relations in various domains to better serve their interests.
- At a meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2022, Bahraini Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani reiterated Bahrain’s keenness to “build bridges with Syria...in support of its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the restoration of security and stability.”
- In June 2022, H.E. Waheed Mubarak Sayyar was welcomed as Bahrain’s ambassador to Syria with President Al-Assad accepting his credentials and wishing him a successful mission in Damascus.

Supporting Documents

Araa article June 2023: Syria’s Return to the Arab League Distances Damascus from Alliances Outside the Arab Regime

Araa Article, May 2023: A Permanent Solution in Syria Faces Two Dilemmas: The Foreign Military Presence and the Refugee File

Araa Article, September 2021: Africa is a Safe Haven for Terrorist Groups after Pressure on them in Iraq and Syria

Araa Article, August 2020: Iran Intervened in Syria to Prevent the Objection of America and the West and Adopted a Strategy of Hybrid Warfare

Araa Article, November 2019: Turkish Military Aggression in Syria: Objectives and Repercussions for the Region and the Middle East

GRC Publication 2016: “A Note on Syrian Refugees in the Gulf: Attempting to Assess Data and Policies”

GRC Publication 2014: “The Syrian Crisis and Russia’s Approach to the Gulf”



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