**Syria in the Arab League**

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“We will not walk away to leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran. … The United States is not going anywhere,” bragged US President Joe Biden during his visit to the Middle East last year while trying to muffle apprehensions about his ‘disengagement’ policy towards this region.

But the shifting sands of the Middle East tell a different story now. Despite Washington’s intense pressure, many of the Arab League members have credited Syria’s return to the group after 12 years.

This is the second major setback for American diplomacy in the last two months; the China-mediated Iran-Saudi detente in March was the first lethal blow to the already waning influence of the US in the region. Both events have corroborated the emerging realities in the Middle East where the US is finding itself increasingly isolated.

It is time for the United States to wake up and smell the coffee. The Biden administration needs to face the new reality and shake off the delusions of the past. It is no longer a question of if, but how, the United States will compete for influence in the Middle East. For the first time in decades, Washington appears so weak that it is struggling to earn its place in the Middle East theatre rather than simply taking it for granted.

In a bold and unprecedented move, Arab foreign ministers congregated in an extraordinary meeting of the Arab League in Cairo to announce the restoration of Syria's membership in the league after more than a decade of suspension. This momentous decision, despite some reservations from a few members, was approved at the Arab League’s council and has facilitated the resumption of Syria's participation in all meetings of the council and its various organizations and bodies effective immediately as of May 7, 2023. This marks a significant shift in the region's geopolitical landscape.

Three key factors have played the instrumental role in the expedition of such a decision, which was deemed inconceivable even at the start of this year: the Biden administration’s policy of gradual extrication and disengagement, the devastating earthquake in Syria – and Turkiye –and China’s successful mediation in the Iran-Saudi reconciliation in the month of March. The synergistic effect of these factors created a natural momentum which eventually culminated in the return of Syria into the Arab League.

The reinstatement of Syria into the Arab League is a pivotal development in a wider regional geopolitical transformation that has witnessed a series of novel diplomatic alliances that have disrupted the prevailing regional order. In the past few months, states have displayed an escalating level of autonomy, while a new player – China – has made its mark, contesting the United States' role as the region's dominant powerbroker and propelling the Iran-Saudi Arabia deal forward.

The catastrophic earthquakes on February 6, which struck parts of Syria still grappling with the ravages of war, have also intensified the calls for a reevaluation of existing sanctions, as the country struggled to secure the much-needed aid. Together, these factors have set the stage for an unprecedented regional reconfiguration that could yield dramatic consequences for all involved. Undoubtedly, the reinstatement of Syria into the Arab League does not provide an acute remedy for the country's two fundamental challenges: the ongoing conflict and the financial strain it faces.

Two immediate inferences can be drawn from the Arab League's decision, despite Washington’s serious opposition, to readmit Syria after a prolonged period of isolation. One, it is certainly a symbolic triumph for Damascus. Two, a wider regional realignment is taking shape where America's influence is diminishing, while China is being accepted as a reliable and peace-loving mediator.

The Arab League's decision to disregard US reservations signifies America's declining leverage and a growing inclination among allies to pursue their own political course. Arab nations have become increasingly cognizant of the US's strategic motivations, including the instigation of conflict and turmoil in the Middle East, and have come to recognize that American interests are not aligned with a unified Arab world but rather with a fragmented one that can be more easily manipulated to serve its own interests.

On the other hand, China has played a commendable and prominent role in the reconciliation process in different conflicts in the Middle East. Being a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has taken the lead in mediating between the conflicting parties. China's proactive efforts in diplomacy and economic cooperation have shown that it is genuinely committed and capable of contributing to regional peace, rather than just making empty promises. Under the mediation of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran, who had long been at odds with each other over the Syrian crisis, have achieved an unprecedented reconciliation.

This momentous breakthrough has directly spurred the Arab League's decision to reinstate Syria into its fold. China is actively making efforts for peace in Syria. Last month, the Chinese government's Special Envoy on Middle East Affairs visited Syria and engaged in a series of productive discussions about resolving the Syrian crisis and supporting Syria's return to the Arab League.

“For the first time in decades, the United States has to compete for influence in the Middle East rather than taking its primacy for granted. Washington might even have to get used to a growing role for China,” wrote Max Boot in his Washington Post column on May 8. So, to the utter disdain of Washington, the sands are shifting in the Middle East.

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