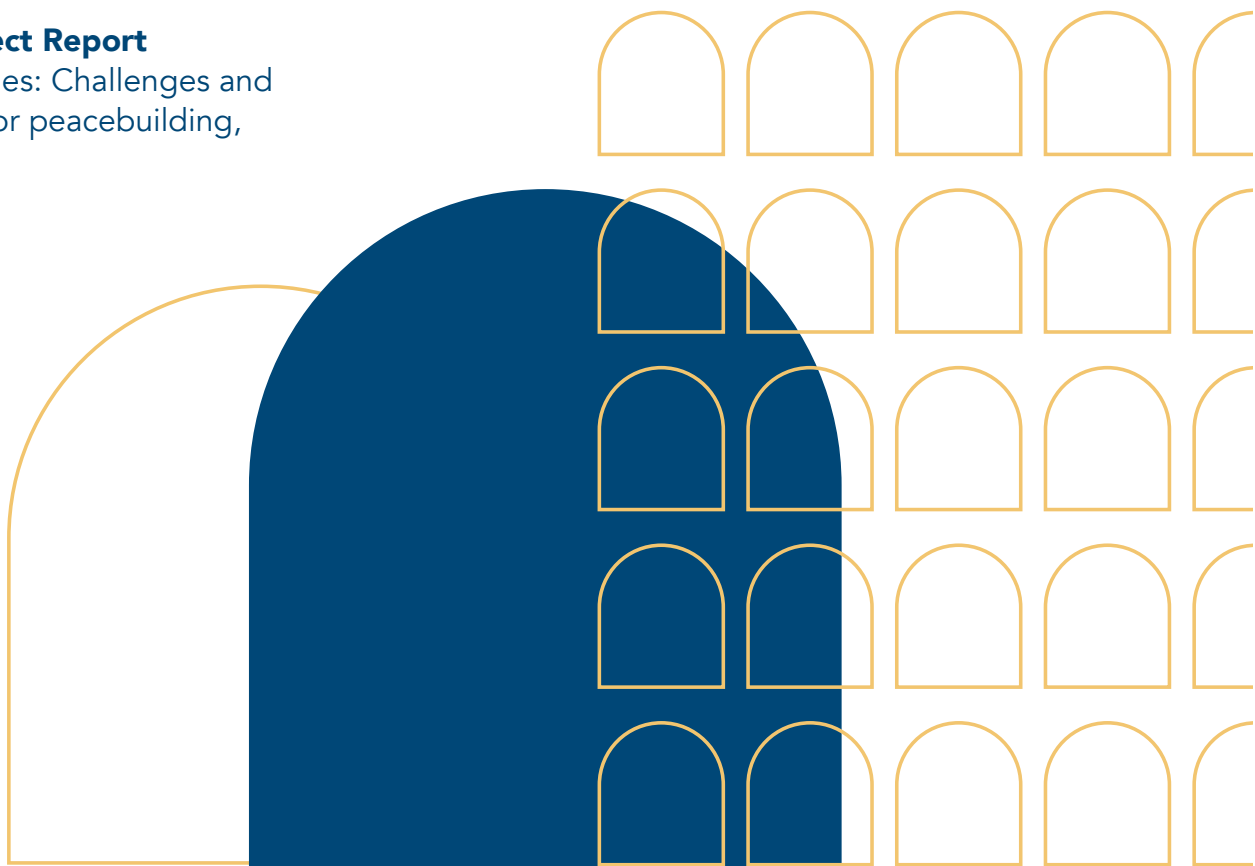


One year after: Where is Saudi Arabia and Syria's normalisation process?

Joseph Daher
Robert Schuman Centre, EUI

Research Project Report
Syrian trajectories: Challenges and
opportunities for peacebuilding,

March 2024



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Published by
European University Institute (EUI)
Via dei Roccettini 9, I-50014
San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

This project is funded by the European Union, Germany and Denmark as part of the Syria Peace Initiative implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). Views and opinions expressed in our publications are solely those of the individual authors and do not represent those of donors, GIZ, or European University Institute.

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One year after: Where is Saudi Arabia and Syria's normalisation process?

*Joseph Daher**

* Joseph Daher is a part-time affiliate professor at the European University Institute, Florence (Italy). He works under the aegis of the 'Syrian Trajectories' research project in the Middle East Directions Programme. He has completed a doctorate in Development Studies at SOAS, University of London (2015), and a doctorate in Political Science at Lausanne University, Switzerland (2018).

Executive summary

The re-integration of Syria in the League of Arab States (LAS) and its normalisation with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in spring 2023 have not resulted in a crucial development of political and economic relations between the two countries. The economic impacts of the normalisation process remain limited, with only modest Saudi investments in Syria. However, Riyadh remains one of the main export markets for Syrian products. Progress in political relations between the two countries has been restricted, mainly to Riyadh approving the appointment of a Syrian ambassador to the KSA and a transfer of authority over Hajj and Umrah affairs to the Syrian regime. There are various reasons for obstacles and challenges to enhancing relations between the KSA and Syria, including the inability of the Syrian regime to deliver on security issues, sanctions, economic crisis in Syria and regional dynamics, especially linked to Iran-Saudi relations. More generally, there is an inability and/or unwillingness of the Syrian regime to deliver on the requests of its interlocutors, which hampers any restoration of deeper relations with regional actors.

Introduction

In May 2023 at the Arab League summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) warmly greeted Bashar al-Assad, following the return of Syria to the League of Arab States (LAS) after more than 12 years' absence. This development took place against the background of the historical political rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is ongoing. The temporary suspension of the normalisation process between Saudi Arabia and Israel following the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip since October 2023 has also reinforced cooperation between the two in recent months. These regional political evolutions have direct effects on relations between the KSA and Syria, including regarding political and economic exchanges.

Riyadh's decision to rehabilitate Damascus was connected to national objectives and regional dynamics involving the kingdom's security, political and economic priorities. First, the Saudi kingdom has been seeking to significantly reduce smuggling of Captagon, production of which in Syria massively expanded after 2011, as Riyadh is the biggest market for the drug and it is particularly consumed by its youths.² Second and more importantly, the normalisation process has been an outcome of Saudi Arabia's evolving political strategy in terms of regional foreign policy. The confrontational and aggressive foreign policy adopted by MBS, symbolised by the deadly war initiated against Yemen in 2015 and maximum pressure on Iran and its allies in the region, has been a failure. This policy turned out to be too politically costly and damaging to the KSA's project to reform the economy. The Saudi kingdom has therefore tried to establish more cordial relations with its neighbours and more generally seek a form of authoritarian stability in the region. Finally, the reorientation of Saudi foreign policy is principally linked to the need for the kingdom to concentrate on economic reforms and the Saudi Vision 2030 objectives.³

This research report examines the trajectory and evolution of Saudi Arabia-Syria relations after their normalisation in April 2023 and their impacts on the socio-economic, political and security situations in Syria. The paper first looks at the political and economic evolution and achievements and limitations in relations between the two countries since April 2023. Second, it analyses the challenges and obstacles to improving Syria-Saudi relations, particularly regarding furthering political and economic connections.

1. Syria-Saudi normalisation: Limited impacts

Syria's re-integration in the LAS and normalisation with Saudi Arabia have not led to a significant increase and expansion of political and economic exchanges between Damascus and Riyadh. Only very minor evolutions have taken place in Saudi-Syria relations.

Economically, the effects of the normalisation process remain limited. Damascus has announced Saudi's approval of resuming direct flights from Syria to Saudi airports after a break that lasted more than 11 years.⁴ At the same time, meetings between business representatives of the two countries have also taken place. In June 2023 on the sidelines of the Arab-China Business Conference held in Riyadh, the federations of Saudi and Syrian chambers of commerce reached an agreement to enable investors to tap into investment opportunities

2 According to a CNN article published in 2022 "the drug was popularised in the kingdom some 15 years ago but has taken off more intensely in the past five years." Adam Pourahmadi and Abbas Al-Lawati "Saudi Arabia is Becoming the Drug Capital of the Middle East," CNN, 2 September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3QHeAxx>

3 For more detail, see Joseph Daher, Syria's Regional Normalisation Process: Between Opportunities and Challenges, *Orient, German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East*, Volume 4, 2023.

4 Al-Modon, "Saudi Arabia Agrees to Resume Operating Flights From Damascus" (in Arabic), 8 June 2023, <https://bit.ly/3S4gjMs>

in Saudi Arabia and Syria, and establish economic forums to increase trade between the two countries.⁵ However, only a small number of Saudi companies established themselves in Syria in 2023.⁶ In addition to the four Saudi companies licensed in Syria in 2023, the total number of companies set up by Gulf investors was only 14: three from Bahrain, two from the UAE, one from Oman and eight from Kuwait.⁷ Trade between Syria and the Saudi kingdom had actually increased prior to the normalisation process, from USD 92.35 million in 2017 to nearly USD 431 million in 2022. The main reason for this growth was the reopening of the Nassib-Jaber border crossing with Jordan, Syria's gateway to the Gulf, in October 2018.⁸ Saudi Arabia remained one of Syria's main export markets in 2023, mostly for food products. The total value of trade is nevertheless far from the pre-war level of USD 1.30 billion in 2010.

At the political level, small steps have been taken to advance relations between Riyadh and Damascus. Syria's embassy in Saudi Arabia reopened in October 2023 after the arrival of Syria's Consul General Ihsan Raman in the kingdom.⁹ In November, Bashar al-Assad attended a joint Arab-Islamic summit on Gaza in Riyadh. A month later in December 2023, Mr. Ayman Soussan was appointed the new ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates announced the beginning of Syrian Embassy operations in Riyadh. In the same month, the Syrian Minister of Religious Endowments, Dr. Mohammad Abdul-Sattar al-Sayyed, visited the King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran in Madinah.¹⁰ This led to an agreement a few weeks later in January 2024 between the Syrian Ministry of Religious Endowments and the Saudi Ministry of the Hajj to allow Damascus to assume control of Hajj and Umrah affairs for the year 2024. This marked an official transfer of the issue away from the Syrian opposition after more than a decade.¹¹ During the same month, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) ambassador to Syria, Hassan Ahmed al-Shehhi, finally arrived in Damascus. This was a relatively significant development as he was the first ambassador from the UAE to Syria since 2011.¹²

These various announcements and measures are relatively modest in enhancing relations between the two countries. They are mainly limited to Saudi approving the appointment of Syrian ambassador Soussan to the Kingdom and the transfer of authority over Hajj and Umrah affairs to the Syrian regime. At the same time, Saudi Arabia's embassy has yet to resume its operations in Syria, despite multiple rumours and announcements by pro-regime newspapers and officials of its re-opening since May 2023.¹³ Moreover, at the end of January the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre announced the building of 500 housing units in the city of

5 Saudi Gazette, "Saudi Arabia, Syria Agree to Enhance Economic Cooperation, Trade and Investment Activities," 13 June 2023, <https://bit.ly/3SpY99f>

6 Saudi investors established one company in 2022, two in 2021, none in 2020, two in 2019 and three in 2018. It is estimated that two companies were established by Saudi investors in 2017, two in 2016, and three in 2015. Most other Saudi companies, however, decided to leave the country in the later stages of the conflict. For example, Kingdom Holding, a Riyadh-based conglomerate owned by Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal, sold its shares in the Four Seasons Hotel in Damascus in 2018. The Syria Report, "Saudi Investors to Enter Phosphate Sector in Rare Investment," 8 August 2023, <https://bit.ly/47LSXRi>

7 The Syria Report, "End of Year Sees Handful of Companies Established by Foreign Investors," 19 December 2023, <https://bit.ly/3S7P4At>

8 In January 2023, the Syrian government allowed imports of all Saudi goods after more than a decade of restrictions. Prior to this decision, the government authorised traders to import a limited list of goods from the Saudi market, mostly chemicals and petrochemicals. In addition to this, in 2019 the Syrian government authorised imports of all types of goods from Jordan, including those of non-Jordanian origin, which in effect meant that Saudi goods could enter Syria via Jordan. (The Syria Report, "Syria Lifts All Restrictions on Trade With Saudi Arabia," 24 January 2023, <https://bit.ly/3UGQ7u2>

9 A month previously on 27 and 28 September 2023, Syrian Ministry of Tourism Martini participated in a World Tourism Day conference in Riyadh, with the presence of a number of ministers and heads of tourism delegations from 120 countries and 500 international tourism leaders. (Syrian Ministry of Tourism S.A.R, Facebook, 27 September 2023, <https://bit.ly/3HRC8dt>)

10 Saudi Press Agency, "Syrian Minister of Awqaf Visits King Fahd Quran Printing Complex," 24 December 2024, <https://bit.ly/49tVVvh>

11 The Syrian National Coalition had managed the Hajj file since 2013. Al-Modon, "Saudi Arabia Withdraws Hajj File from Opposition, Hands it to Syrian Regime," *The Syrian Observer*, 11 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3SrD6TQ>

12 Al-Watan, "U.A.E. Raises Diplomatic Representation in Syria," *The Syrian Observer*, 31 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3SNchJS>

13 The National, "Saudi Arabia to Resume Embassy Activities in Damascus, Syrian Source Says," 22 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/47JKFcP>; In January and February, Syrian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Ayman Soussan, and the newspaper al-Watan announced on several occasions that the Saudi Arabian embassy would resume its operations soon.

Maraa in the northern countryside of Aleppo.¹⁴ This showed that humanitarian financial support could still be directed to territories outside the control of the Syrian regime. Politically, it meant that Damascus was not the only Syrian interlocutor of Riyadh. A certain number of Syrian opposition members are still residing in Saudi Arabia and no threats to expel them currently exist. This demonstrates that Riyadh is still very cautious about accelerating the normalisation process with Damascus. Numerous obstacles still exist to improve the relationship between the two linked to Saudi national interests and foreign dynamics.

2. Obstacles and challenges

The impacts of the normalisation process between Syria and the KSA are restricted at all levels. The challenges to the progress of the normalisation process between Riyadh and Damascus are connected to multiple issues, starting with the inability of the Syrian regime to deliver on security issues relating to Captagon traffic, the continual existence of sanctions, the economic crisis in Syria and regional dynamics, particularly connected to Iran-Saudi relations.

First, on the (in)ability of the Syrian regime to deliver on demands made by the KSA and other regional actors, Saudi Arabia and Jordan are still awaiting improvements in collaboration by the Syrian authorities in the fight against Captagon traffic and related security issues. In an event on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2023 Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, warned against "the dangers of the explosive growth" of synthetic drugs in the Middle East and explained the "recent increase in methamphetamine" by its production "in countries with insecure and unstable conditions," implicitly pointing at Syria.¹⁵ Security threats, or at least expressions of dissatisfaction, by Jordanian authorities on the Syrian-Jordanian border have been ongoing and even worsening. The Jordanian army has also conducted operations on Syrian soil since the return of Syria to the LAS.¹⁶ A total of 194 smuggling and infiltration attempts, including 88 smuggling attempts using drones carrying narcotics and explosives, were recorded between January and August 2023, according to Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) figures. In comparison, 383 smuggling and infiltration attempts occurred in 2022.¹⁷ Moreover, following the outbreak of the Israeli war on the occupied Gaza Strip in October 2023, smuggling operations and clashes between traffickers and Jordanian soldiers have greatly increased, particularly since mid-December, on the Jordanian-Syrian border. Jordanian aircraft carried out raids and strikes in Syria on farms and warehouses presumed to be used by drug traffickers, and killed several smugglers trying to cross the border from Syria.^{18,19} On 18 January 2024 one of these Jordanian aerial bombardments resulted in the death of ten civilians in the neighbouring towns of Arman and Malh in the southeastern province of Suwayda.²⁰ The Syrian Foreign Ministry issued a statement a few days later denouncing Jordanian Air Force strikes on Syrian territory and adding that there was "no justification for such

14 Saudi Press Agency, "Social / King Salman Relief Centre Signs a Joint Executive Programme to Provide 500 Temporary Housing Units for Those Affected by the Earthquake in Syria," (in Arabic), 25 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3uzP6cx>

15 Al-Arabiya English, "Saudi FM Warns Against 'Explosive Growth' of Synthetic Drugs in Arab World," 19 September 2023, <https://bit.ly/3SZJq5h>

16 The first operation of the Jordanian army on Syrian territory occurred in May 2023, in which an important drug trafficker, Marai al-Ramthan, and his family were killed in an air raid in southern Syria attributed to Jordan.

17 The Jordan Times, "Drug Trafficking Remains High as JAF Reports Increased Drug Busts on North-Eastern Borders," 19 December 2023, <https://bit.ly/490f6wf>

18 Clara Hage, "Arms Trafficking Accelerates, Fuelling Jordan-Syria Border Tension," *L'Orient Today*, 15 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3Ssv1OJ>

19 The leader of the Aql sheikhdom in the Druze community in Suweida, Hikmat al-Hijri, addressed Jordan's airstrikes south of Suweida, expressing concern over civilian casualties. Hijri acknowledged the pressing issue of eradicating the drug phenomenon and associated activities, both locally and internationally, especially negatively impacting the southern regions. Hijri called on Jordan's King Abdullah II to guarantee that airstrikes were directed exclusively against smugglers and their supporters, particularly considering their proximity to populated areas. Highlighting a common enemy in the struggle against the drug phenomenon, he encouraged cooperation between the two entities. Al-Souria Net, "Hikmat al-Hijri on Jordanian Strikes on Syria: We Support This, Our Enemy is One," *The Syrian Observer*, 17 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/48DAmbn>

20 Ali Haj Suleiman and Husam Hezaber, "At Least 10 Civilians Dead in Suspected Jordanian Air Raids in Syria," *al-Jazeera*, 18 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3HrPaOw>

military operations.”²¹ The Director of Military Media in the JAF, Brigadier General Mustafa al-Hiyari, stated that those behind the drug smuggling operation on Jordan's northern border are "gangs" and added that any presence of militias ultimately was the responsibility of the Syrian government, regardless of their connection with it. He also added that there were foreign agendas behind the smugglers' operations, in a veiled reference to Iran and Hezbollah. Al-Hiyari finally stated that despite multiple attempts to communicate with the Syrian state, the efforts were fruitless in terms of collaboration, forcing Jordanian armed forces to employ force to curtail all forms of smuggling.²²

Damascus's unwillingness or inability to control its territory has only been worsening. It lacks the ability to enforce agreements because of political and financial constraints, while Hezbollah's, Iran's and to a lesser extent Russia's influence have only expanded, particularly in southern areas. Comparisons can be made with the normalisation process between Turkey and Syria, which is at a standstill.²³ While the Syrian regime has declared that no progress in relations with Turkey would occur without the end of the Turkish military presence in Syria, Ankara remains frustrated with Damascus's inability to meet its demands to welcome and manage the return of Syrian refugees and to put an end to Kuridish-led rule in northeast Syria by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The Syrian regime is politically, economically and militarily too weak to intervene in the north and it sees the return of millions of refugees as a political and security threat, and an additional economic weight that it cannot bear.

Second, sanctions still constitute a significant obstacle to foreign investment and to deepening the process of normalisation beyond just the diplomatic restoration of ties. The USA and the European Union have officially condemned these normalisation processes but have been unable to prevent countries in the region from restoring their relations with Damascus. In the USA, a bill called the 'Assad Regime Anti-Normalisation Act of 2023'²⁴ was introduced in May 2023 to expand the list of possible Caesar Act targets to include all members of the Syrian parliament, senior members of the ruling Baath Party and those responsible for diverting international humanitarian aid. In February 2024, the US House of Representatives eventually passed this bill effectively renewing the Caesar Act sanctions and blocking the USA from "recognising or normalising relations with any government of Syria that is led by Bashar Al Assad".²⁵ However, while sanctions are an obstacle to attracting foreign investment and collaboration and therefore hinder a reconstruction process, recovery of the economy and improved state capacity, they are certainly not the only problem. First, the absence of a secure and stable economic situation in Syria is a severe obstacle to boosting local and foreign investment.²⁶ Foreign investments have indeed remained limited and are mostly restricted to Iran and Russia. For example, several agreements were concluded in 2023 between Teheran and Damascus to facilitate trade and economic exchange, particularly during Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi's visit to Syria in May and during the 15th meeting of the Syrian-Iranian Joint High Committee held in Tehran in December.²⁷ Second, Damascus has been unable to strengthen the country's financial situation and prevent the constant depreciation of the Syrian pound. The

21 Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Jordanian Air Raids to Disrupt Drug Flows Prompt Row With Syria," *The National*, 24 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3u6vkVX>

22 Mamlaka TV, "Arab Army: We Contacted Syria More Than Once Regarding Drug Smuggling, But the Communication Did not Bear Fruit" (in Arabic), 8 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/47O8eB3>

23 Russian Special Presidential Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentyev told Russian News Agency TASS at the end of January 2024 that talks on normalising relations between Syria and Turkey broke down at the end of last year. TASS, "Dialogue on Normalisation of Syria-Turkey Relations Stalled, Presidential Envoy Says," 29 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/49ul8Wh>

24 Congress Gov, "H.R.3202 – Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act of 2023," 16 May 2023, <https://bit.ly/455vA4N>

25 In addition, the bill requires developing an inter-agency strategy and an annual report to Congress to oppose normalisation with the Assad regime. Congress. Gov, "All Information (Except Text) for H.R.3202 - Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act of 2023", 15 February 2024, <https://bit.ly/3UIRGrA>

26 As an indicator of the lack of incentives in Syria, pro-regime media website Athr Press stated at the beginning of February 2024 that the Syrian government was possibly looking at suppressing a turnkey contract with Emirati company International Energy Investment (IEI) awarded in 2021 to build a 300 MW photovoltaic project in Wadyan Al-Rabee near the Tishreen power plant in Damascus, because of its failure to implement it, according to an anonymous source at the Ministry of Electricity. Athr Press, "Directed to Withdraw the Emirati Project in the Damascus Countryside." (in Arabic), 8 February 2024, <https://bit.ly/3UEIYdE>

27 SANA, "Syria, Iran Sign Several Agreements," 9 December 2023, <https://bit.ly/490iQOo>

value of the Syrian pound on the black market was SYP 6,500 per USD in January 2023 and it reached SYP 14,500 by early February 2024, a rise of about 123%.²⁸ This even further erodes the attractiveness of potential rapid and medium-term returns and profits on investments in the country and therefore does not encourage any impetus to invest, whether from inside or outside the country. Third, Syria's financial capacity is constrained in both the public and private sectors, and it does not have operational and functional infrastructure or a skilled labour force. The Syrian regime has allocated only very modest investments to reconstructing or improving its infrastructure, instead apportioning most of its spending to the war effort, public sector wages and subsidies, although these have been constantly decreasing. The 2024 budget is one of the smallest in decades as in real terms – using the official exchange rate of 11,557 SYP per USD at the time the budget was announced on 23 October 2023 – it reached USD 3.1 billion, including USD 800 million for investment. In comparison, the 2023 budget was USD 5.5 billion.²⁹ In addition to the insufficiency of sources of funding, the country suffers from a shortage of qualified manpower, which is combined with continual high rates of emigration, particularly of young graduates.³⁰ The dual effects of sanctions and the deepening economic crisis do not make the country attractive to any major Saudi investments.

Finally, progress in Syria's regional normalisation is also dependent on sustained improvement and development in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and more generally the end of the regional turmoil connected to the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip. Indeed, while rapprochement between Riyadh and Teheran has accelerated the normalisation process with Damascus, a deterioration of these relations could have direct negative effects on those between the Saudi kingdom and the Syrian regime.³¹ Despite divergent interests regarding the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip since October 2023, relations between Teheran and Riyadh have continued to improve, although on a moderate and careful path. Saudi Crown Prince MBS and Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi, for instance, met face to face on the sidelines of a joint Arab-Islamic summit on Gaza in Riyadh in November 2023.³² In addition, several bilateral initiatives have been concluded, including a visa waiver programme to increase the number of visitors and foster business travel between the two countries. However, the regional impacts of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip are still unfolding with the particular case of Yemen, the stability of which is of particular significance for Saudi Arabia. At the beginning of December 2023, Washington set up a multinational naval force to protect merchant ships in the Red Sea, through which 12% of world trade passes, against Houthi attacks on ships travelling to or connected with Israel.³³ The main objective of this multinational naval force is to guarantee passage through one of the most essential shipping corridors for international trade. Tensions between the two actors have mounted dangerously since then, particularly as the USA has increased its attacks on Houthis. Iranian officials and the Houthis have nevertheless been careful to not compromise the security and stability of the Saudi kingdom.³⁴ At the same time, Riyadh has not participated in the multinational naval force led by Washington, since this could negatively impact the peace negotiations in Yemen and reignite tensions. Both actors, Teheran and Riyadh, have currently interests in maintaining good

28 The bank official exchange rate passed from SYP 4,522 per USD in January 2023 to 12,562 in January 2024.

29 See Joseph Daher, "Syria's Draft National Budget for 2024 Reflects the Depth of its Economic Crisis," *al-Majalla*, 6 November 2023, <https://bit.ly/3ucxwuW>

30 According to Frontex, Europe's border agency, the number of illegal border crossings by Syrians into the EU more than doubled between 2021 and 2022, from 46,395 in 2021 to 92,472, while the number of first-time Syrian asylum applicants rose 17% year on year to 116,980 in 2022. (Eurostat, "114 830 Asylum Applications in October 2023," 14 January 2023, <https://bit.ly/47KDmBE>). In 2023, Syrian nationals were the largest group of asylum seekers in Europe with 177,390 first-time Syrian asylum seekers, a 31% increase on the previous year and the highest total since 2016. (The Syria Report, "Chart: First-Time Asylum Applications by Syrians in Europe (2011-2023)," 30 January 2024, <https://bit.ly/3HV27kg>)

31 In August 2023, Lebanese website al-Modon stated, for instance, that restoration works at the Saudi embassy in Damascus had temporarily stopped following tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Mustapha Muhammed, "Damascus: Saudi Arabia Stops Renovating its Embassy... Tensions with Iran and American Offers" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 3 August 2023, <https://bit.ly/3SbXWVG>

32 It was the first visit of an Iranian president to the Saudi kingdom since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad represented Iran at an OIC summit in Medina in August 2012.

33 Between November 18 and January 13, more than 27 commercial boats traveling in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden were attacked by the Houthis.

34 Except clashes at the border – which led to the death of four Saudi soldiers in October 2023 – the Houthis have not fired a single missile against the Saudi kingdom since the beginning of the Saudi-Houthi negotiations in 2022. The war in Gaza has not disrupted this status quo.

relations, which is also in the interest of Damascus.³⁵

However, the continuing Israeli war on the Gaza Strip and its regional impacts are an obstacle to further progress between Damascus and Riyadh, as the latter is awaiting its end to advise on the way forward politically regarding its regional policies. This situation is partially immobilising any political evolution in the region, including between Damascus and Riyadh. Moreover, Syria is not among the top foreign priorities of the Saudi kingdom as its political role is relatively insignificant outside its borders.

Conclusion

Nearly a year after its conclusion, the Syria-Saudi normalisation process has remained mostly restricted to restoring diplomatic ties, with only modest political and economic progress. Deeper political and economic relations and exchanges are still to be developed to have an impact in Syria.

The Syrian regime has been unwilling, or unable, to satisfy Saudi and Jordanian demands for a reduction of the Captagon traffic and associated security threats. On the contrary, clashes between Jordan and smugglers have significantly increased, particularly since December 2023. This has led to direct Jordanian interventions on Syrian territory, including arial bombing. At the same time, Syria's deepening economic and financial crisis does not make the country attractive for investments, including by Saudi Arabia. Finally, while relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran continue to improve, the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip and its regional impacts are representing an obstacle to further progress between Damascus and Riyadh. Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region are awaiting the end of the war to take new important steps in their foreign policies, including on Syria.

This situation reflects a more general trend in the inability and/or unwillingness on the part of the Syrian regime to deliver on the demands of its interlocutors, preventing any restoration of deeper ties with various regional actors. Moreover, the inability and weakness of the Syrian regime to play any significant role in regional politics, as in the current Israeli-Palestinian war, do not foster any willingness of neighbouring states to progress rapidly in restoring closer relations with Damascus, as its role is passive and close to insignificant.

Progress in Saudi-Syrian relations is therefore limited, as Riyadh is still expecting more from Damascus on security issues, and has to manage more important and urgent issues.

35 However, divergent interests still exist. Saudi Arabia has in fact not formally renounced to a normalization process with Israel, by conditioning it on a road map leading to the creation of a two-state solution principle (establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel), nor on the possibility of obtaining advanced security guarantees from the United States. It is precisely these scenarios that could jeopardize the détente agreement with the Iranian state in the future, if Teheran's interests are ignored in these types of agreements.

Research Project Report
March 2024

