

# Syria: Peace and Development Diplomacy Takes Off

by Mary Jane Freeman and Carl Osgood

March 30—In the wake of the stunning March 10 China-brokered accord between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a measured drumbeat of normalizing diplomatic ties among countries of the Southwest Asian region has begun. Most emblematic are meetings and dialogue between the Syrian Arab Republic and many of its estranged former Arab League partners.

The impetus for peace and development planted by China in this long-volatile region is not only a game changer for ending festering wars and terrorism launched by an Anglo-American elite, but it also holds potential for reviving its role as a crossroad between East and West, for the New Silk Road with 21st-Century characteristics. [See Sam Nettnin’s presentation elsewhere in this issue.]

Opposition to Syria’s normalizing relations arose, not unexpectedly, from the very war hawks who began the “regime-change” war in 2011 against Syria, and who have profited handsomely from it. Within days of the accord, American and Israeli air strikes on eastern Syria, Aleppo, and the capital Damascus resumed. These fatally flawed actions against President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian people have failed for 12 long years. Both the democratically re-elected Assad and the Syrian people have continued to resist, to the great chagrin of the British and U.S. perpetual war elites.

## Animosities, Broken Relations Overcome

President Bashar al-Assad traveled to Moscow March 15 to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, discussing a wide range of issues including humanitarian aid, Syria-Türkiye relations, and economic cooperation. Five days later, Assad and his wife Asma led a delegation to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for a state visit. UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin

Zayed Al Nahyan noted on Twitter that their talks were “constructive” and “aimed at developing relations” between Syria and the UAE. These had been ruptured by the West’s “regime change” war and vilification of Assad, based on widely discredited allegations of chemical warfare against his own citizens (e.g., see the UN Security Council [testimony](#) on March 24, 2023 of Aaron Maté on the alleged Douma incident of April 7, 2018).

The new road to regional stability and development



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*Presidents Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin met in Moscow March 15, 2023 to discuss humanitarian aid, Syria-Türkiye relations, and economic cooperation.*

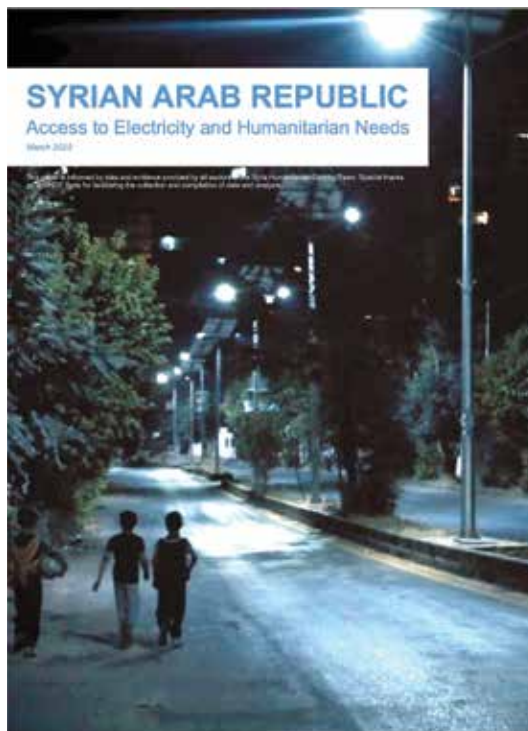
taken by these various rapprochements between Southwest Asian nations could lead to a vote within the Arab League to lift Syria’s suspension. Also key in the regional picture are unconfirmed but widely covered reports that following talks by phone March 22 between Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar—which included Syria—the parties are closer to a Syria-Türkiye meeting. Such a meeting has been a persistent bone of contention due to the Kurdish militias’ role on the Syria-Türkiye border.

Then on March 23, news broke that Saudi Arabia-Syria discussions—despite deep animosities including

Saudi funding of attempts to overthrow Syria's government at one time—may have reached agreement on reopening embassies. It is expected that respective Saudi and Syrian embassies could open as soon as mid-April. The *Wall Street Journal* even reported that the Syria-Saudi discussions in Riyadh were brokered by Russia. If true, that puts China and Russia at the center of diplomatic breakthroughs for peace, a reality abhorred by London and Washington, who have spent decades destabilizing the nations of Southwest Asia.

Indicative of China's continuing promotion of peace coupled with development, China's Ambassador to Syria, Shi Hongwei, met with Syria's Prime Minister Hussein Arnous to discuss strengthening bilateral relations on March 24. At the top of their agenda was Syria's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. Arnous thanked China for its humanitarian relief and medical aid sent for the Feb. 6 earthquake survivors. In addition to the 500,000 Syrians who died due to the 12 years of war, thousands more were killed by the earthquakes. Chinese Ambassador Shi told Arnous that China will continue to provide aid, and will assist in housing and rebuilding of infrastructure in the affected areas.

Exemplary region-wide action for development occurred when a quartet of agriculture ministers from Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan met in Damascus March 26–27. Syria's news agency SANA reported the ministers "signed a memo of understanding" for "cooperation in [the] agricultural field and the promotion of trade" that "would achieve agricultural integration" among the four countries. Investment projects will be identified to build "facilities for livestock and fodder," Syrian Agriculture Minister Eng. Mohammad Hassan Qatana told SANA. Each of the other ministers spoke of a "starting point for joint work [to] achieve integration" to serve the "interests of our peoples." Lebanese



Source: Syria Humanitarian Country Team/UNDP Syria  
*Prior to the war, Syria was self-sufficient in food, and an exporter of oil and electricity. A March 2022 UN report documented the deliberate targeting of Syria's electric power facilities.*

minister Abbas Hajj Hassan declared, "this [memo] is a foundational step for a joint Arab action emanating from" Syria to ensure Arab "food security." Another seismic change unwanted by Western perpetual warriors.

### Syria's Sectors To Rebuild

Three key sectors devastated by the brutal regime change war imposed on Syria are electricity, water, and oil; each are vital to human survival. Deprived of these basic needs, 90% of Syria's population had been forced into living below the poverty level even before the February 2023 earthquakes. Prior to the war, Syria was self-sufficient in food, and an exporter of oil and electricity!

Back in March 2022 the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)

released a [study](#), "Syrian Arab Republic: Access to Electricity and Humanitarian Needs," which documented the deliberate targeting of electric power facilities. It reported:

Two of the country's 13 major power plants were fully destroyed: the Zeyzoun Power Plant in Idlib Governate (487 MW installed capacity) and the Aleppo Thermal Power Station (1,065 MW installed capacity).

The World Bank reported that six other power plants were partially destroyed.

As a result of this damage, the country's electricity generation capacity fell from 5,800 MW in 2010 ... to 4,000 MW in 2018.

Then the tightening of sanctions caused Syria's installed electricity generation capacity to fall further, to 2,000 MW in 2021, a collapse of 63%! The inability to obtain replacement parts and maintain the surviving plants, due to sanctions, has become acute. Whereas, in



UN/Evan Schneider

Addressing a UN conference on water, Bassam Sabbagh, Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations, denounced the “coercive measures” of sanctions against Syria. March 23, 2023.

2010, “93% of the country had access to electricity,” 12 years later the Syrian population was consuming 85% less electricity *per capita*. As of mid-2022, only 30% of Syria’s population had access to electricity and for only 2 hours per day. Today it is worse.

On access to water, again the OCHA study stated:

[In 2010] access to safe drinking water in Syria was estimated at 92% in rural communities and 98% in urban centers. Seven major water systems serve the country’s eight largest cities.... However, by 2019 annual public water production in Syria had fallen by 40% relative to pre-crisis levels (from 1,700 Mn cubic meters in 2010 to 1,020 Mn cubic meters in 2019).

But making use of water from groundwater sources and springs, or most rivers, requires continuous electricity to pump and distribute the water, electricity which Syria does not have.

Updating this picture, on March 25, 2023, Syrian Ambassador to the UN Bassam Sabbagh addressed a UN conference on Water for Sustainable Development. He denounced the “coercive measures” of sanctions that have impeded Syria’s efforts to secure financing for water projects and equipment to fix damaged facilities. Sabbagh told the gathering that since the beginning of the 2011 “terrorist war imposed on Syria,” at least

41% of its water sector, which “supplies more than 75% of the population, is damaged!” He condemned this as “using water as a weapon,” which is causing enormous suffering. He added that the February earthquakes have worsened the water supply deficit. Severe damage to 80 water supply tanks has left another half-million citizens without adequate water.

In 2010 before the U.S. regime-change war, Syria ran an oil production surplus, and even exported oil and natural gas. Now Syrians are literally freezing without oil or gas for heating or cooking. In a September 2022 interview given to *Global Times*, Syrian Ambassador to China Mohammed Hasanein Khaddam said that the United States and its allies were stealing an average of 66,000 barrels of oil per day (24 million barrels of oil per year), which constitutes four-fifths of Syria’s then-current oil production of 80,000 barrels of oil per day.

The bulk of oil production is located in that portion of the northeastern governorate of Deir Ezzor, east of the Euphrates River, which is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Front (SDF), whose military arm is led by the People’s Protection Unit (YPG), a Kurdish



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The U.S. and its allies have been stealing an average of 66,000 barrels of oil per day from Syria. Shown: a pumpjack in Syria’s Rmelan oil fields.

militia. The SDF “government” is backed and protected, and in part created, by the United States. This is where U.S. troops remain illegally stationed in Syria, “protecting” the Deir Ezzor oil fields (and also wheat fields), and from which the oil is being stolen.

Ambassador Khaddam made clear the enormous losses suffered by the citizens of the real Syrian government:



There are direct losses of \$24.2 billion until the end of the first half of 2022, ... indirect losses totaled \$82.9 billion, which represents the values of lost Syrian production of crude oil, natural gas, LNG, various oil derivatives, and mineral wealth. The decline in production of planned rates within the framework of normal working conditions, came as a result of the crimes of sabotage, destruction, theft and illegal trade....

That's a total of \$107.1 billion which could have been used to aid the population and rebuild certain destroyed facilities.

### **U.S.: No Normalization for Syria**

In response, as the drumbeat for diplomacy was advancing, Israeli and U.S. air strikes resumed targeting Syrian infrastructure and territory. The Israeli Air Force struck first, bombing the Aleppo airport on March 22. Damage to the airport's runway and navigational equipment led to its closure, just when it was needed for humanitarian aid to earthquake victims. Next, on March 24, President Biden authorized precision air strikes fired at eastern Syria. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin argued "the airstrikes were ... in response" to a drone attack on "Coalition forces in Syria" by forces he claimed were "affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)."

The drone attack had killed one American contractor, while the U.S. strikes killed 19 Syrians. Then, on March 30, after Biden had earlier "paused" a second round of U.S. air strikes, a new round of Israeli air strikes hit close to Damascus, injuring two army personnel and causing some material damage. Fortunately, Syrian air defenses shot down some of the missiles.

Forty former U.S. Presidential administrations' war mongers, many of whom ran Syria policy in their day, issued a [letter](#) March 27 to Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, warning:

Piecemeal normalization efforts by some regional governments do not address U.S. national security interests or human rights issues, and they erode the international community's capacity to shape a political process....

By "international community," they mean NATO. They direct Biden and Blinken to set up a "A New

Policy Framework." They state boldly that normalization must not occur, saying:

Unconditional regime normalization is not inevitable. Opposing regime normalization in word only is not enough, as tacitly allowing it is short-sighted and damaging to any hope for regional security and stability.

*A sine qua non* is to "Keep [U.S.] troops" in Syria, and the letter calls for a "multinational Syria Contact Group," so as to work "within a NATO alliance" on their Syria problem.

The letter is a rehash of failed Syria war plans. Indicative is the end section titled, "Maintain the Line Against Assad's Regime & Pursue Accountability for Crimes." It is a lament at not toppling President Assad, nor turning Syrians against him despite draconian Caesar sanctions causing the horrific economic conditions described here. The demand is to "Push accountability and war crimes investigations" against Assad. A further admission of failure is the "Push Back Against Disinformation" section, which states: "The U.S. and allies are losing the information war on Syria."

### **Simple Solutions**

To ensure peace and development for Southwest Asia and the world, it is time to end geopolitics and let diplomacy prevail. To see the deserts bloom and the cradle of civilization flourish again, it is time to follow China's lead. The West, especially the United States, must take up diplomatic solutions.

As for protecting U.S. troops still (illegally) in Syria, there is a solution. Former U.S. Congressman Ron Paul wrote:

"Here's an easy way to protect U.S. forces in Syria from further 'Iran-allied' attacks. Bring them home. Tomorrow. Do not wait another day! ... China has achieved [with the Saudi Arabia-Iran rapprochement—ed.] what the U.S. has resisted for years: peace in the region....

"The United States occupies that huge chunk of Syria where the oil and agriculture are located ... and [is] preventing the natural wealth of Syria [from being] used to rebuild that country. Is it any wonder why the U.S. is so unpopular in the Middle East?"

"How hypocritical is it that the Biden Administration has spent \$100 billion of our dollars to expel Russia from occupying proportionally less territory in Ukraine than Washington occupies in Syria?"