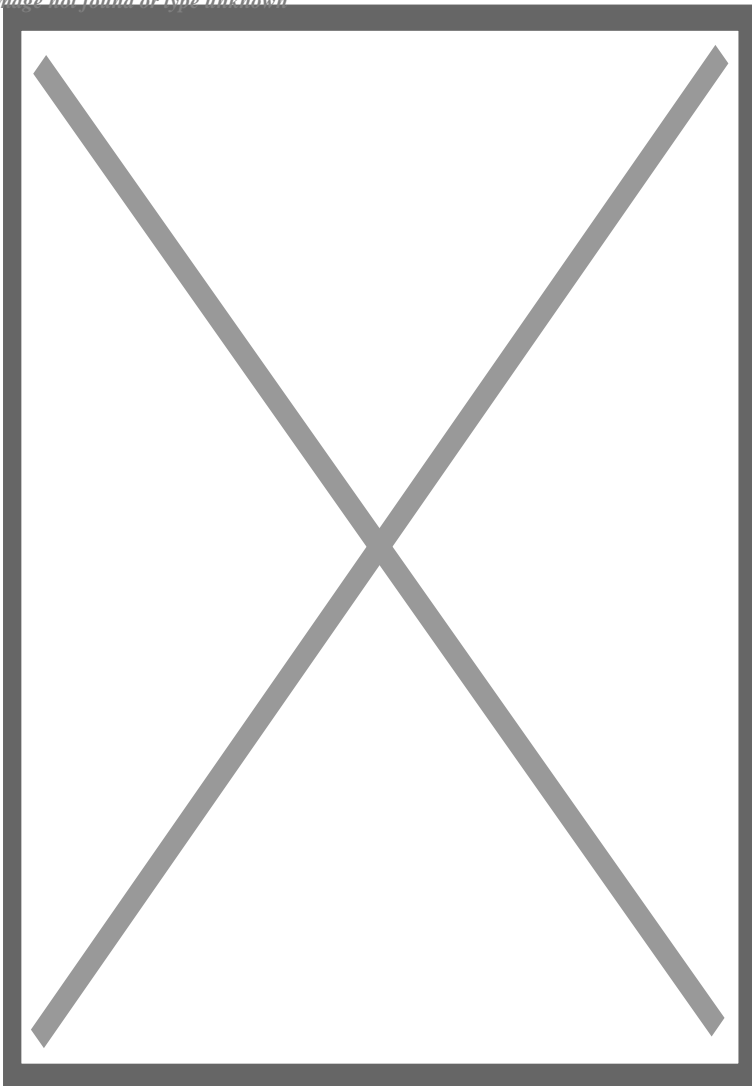


Syrian president in Saudi Arabia to attend Arab League summit for first time in over 10 years

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Syrian President Bashar al-Assad arrives at King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah,

Saudi Arabia, on May 18, 2023 to attend the Arab League summit (Photo by SANA)

Jeddah, May 19 (RHC)-- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is in Saudi Arabia to take part in an Arab League summit upon an official invitation from King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the first such participation since foreign-backed militancy began in the country more than a decade ago.

Assad arrived at King Abdulaziz International Airport in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah on Thursday to attend the 32nd regular session of the 22-member bloc on Friday, Syrian state television reported. The Syrian presidency said in a statement on May 10th that the 57-year-old leader had received an invitation to the May 19h Arab summit in Saudi Arabia.

Assad said the summit "will enhance joint Arab action to achieve the aspirations of the Arab peoples," the statement added. Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Jordan Nayef bin Bandar al-Sudairi delivered the invitation.

Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad and his Saudi Arabian counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, have met on the sidelines of preparatory meetings for the Arab summit. Arab government representatives in Cairo voted on May 7 to return Syria to the Arab League after a 12-year suspension.

All 13 of the 22 member states that attended the session endorsed the decision. However, there is still no Arab consensus on normalization of ties with Damascus. Several governments did not attend the meeting. Among the most notable absentees was Qatar, which continues to back the so-called moderate opposition groups against the incumbent Damascus government.

The vote in the Egyptian capital came days after top Arab diplomats met in Jordan to discuss a roadmap to bring Syria back into its fold as the foreign-sponsored conflict is in its last stages. The decision also includes a commitment to ongoing dialogue with Arab governments to gradually reach a political solution to the conflict, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

Additionally, the Arab League set up a communications committee consisting of Saudi Arabia and Syria's neighbors Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq to follow up on the developments.

The Arab League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011, citing an alleged crackdown by Damascus on opposition protests. Syria has denounced the move as "illegal and a violation of the organization's charter."

Syria was one of the six founding members of the Arab League in 1945. In recent months, an increasing number of countries and political parties have called for the reversal of its suspension from the Arab League. Riyadh and Damascus agreed in March to resume diplomatic relations and re-open embassies after more than a decade.

Assad has already visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman and is expected to visit other Arab states as well in the near future.

The detente process began after Iran and Saudi Arabia clinched a deal to restore diplomatic relations and re-open embassies. Observers say the deal signed in China after seven years of estrangement will boost synergy among Muslim states to help resolve regional issues.

Israel and certain Western states have gone to great lengths to isolate Syria. Yet, a growing number of regional countries, including the UAE, Egypt, Jordan, and Oman, have expressed readiness to resume diplomatic relations with Damascus.

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