

Syria, UAE leaders discuss coronavirus, a thaw in relations

28/03/2020 21:17 by admin

The official Emirati news agency said Syrian President Bashar Assad and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan discussed efforts to contain the coronavirus outbreak and reviewed preventive measures to fight it.

A member of the Syrian Civil defence sanitizes a tent at the Bab Al-Nour internally displaced persons camp, to prevent the spread of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Azaz, Syria. (Reuters/File)

Damascus: Syria's President and one of the United Arab Emirates' most powerful leaders spoke on the phone on Friday, signalling a major thaw in Damascus' troubled relations with Arab countries, which had mostly boycotted President Bashar Assad and backed his opposition.

The official Emirati news agency said Assad and Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan discussed efforts to contain the coronavirus outbreak and reviewed preventive measures to fight it.

Sheikh Mohammed, believed to be the Emirates' day-to-day ruler, said Syria and the UAE need to "replace the humanitarian solidarity over political issues during this common challenge" "we are all facing", according to the report.

The crown prince of the oil-rich Abu Dhabi affirmed that Syria "will not be left alone during these delicate and critical circumstances."

Syria's health system and infrastructure have been decimated by years of conflict. Although Damascus has recorded only five cases of infection with coronavirus, there are concerns the fast-spreading virus may prove a major test for the government.

The UAE had been a supporter of the Syrian opposition during the early years of the war, now in its tenth year. But as the war wound down and with the Syrian army capturing most of the territory that was once lost to the opposition, the UAE and a few Arab countries made limited and usually indirect openings toward Assad's government.

In late 2018, the UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus, for the first time since an organized Arab diplomatic boycott soon after the Syrian war erupted in 2011. The embassy representation is at a charge d'affairs level but its very reopening was a sign that more rapprochement is likely to follow.

Friday's phone call, however, is the first publicized contact between an Arab leader and Assad.

The Syrian opposition, which controls one overpopulated stretch of territory in northwestern Syria, is now mainly supported by Turkey, which the UAE and other Arab countries view with suspicion because of its embrace of regional Islamists.

Syria's official presidency Twitter account said the crown prince stressed that the UAE will support the "Syrian people during these exceptional times".

- AP