



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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The Broken Triangle: Cairo-Riyadh-Damascus

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

Just over two weeks remain before the annual Arab summit conference is scheduled to be held in Damascus. Preparations are well under way: invitations have been issued to the heads of 20 Arab states and the Palestinian Authority, hotel and villa space has been reserved, and the new international conference center (built, ironically, thanks to the generosity of the late Rafiq al-Hariri, whose assassins' trail leads right into the heart of the Syrian leadership hierarchy) is being given a last shine. However, the fate of the gathering remains uncertain, owing to the unresolved political crisis in Lebanon, which pits the US and Saudi-backed "March 14th" coalition majority against the Syrian and Iranian-backed "March 8th" opposition, and has left Lebanon without a President since mid-November. Arab League Secretary-General (and former Egyptian foreign minister) `Amru Musa has repeatedly failed in his efforts to mediate an end to the Lebanese imbroglio. Consequently, both Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and Egypt's President Husni Mubarak are indicating that they may absent themselves from the summit, in order to deliver a sharp symbolic blow to its host, Syria's President Bashar al-Asad. Once again, Lebanon has become a cockpit of regional and inter-Arab tensions. Once again, Syria stands opposed to the majority of Arab states on key regional issues. More than ever, the "Arab world" appears to be a motley and fragmented collection of states nervously trying to protect their particular interests within a regional constellation in which the preponderance of power is

held by non-Arab states - Iran, Turkey and Israel.

Over the last 35 years, the status of the Cairo-Riyadh-Damascus triangle has been a key barometer in evaluating the vicissitudes of the inter-Arab system. When the three capitals were aligned with one another on central issues, their common policies produced tangible results with considerable regional impact: the 1973 war coalition against Israel, the 1976 end to the first phase of the civil war in Lebanon and a renewed common position regarding Arab-Israeli diplomacy, the 1989 Ta'if accord determining the parameters of Lebanon's renewal, the 1990-91 anti-Saddam coalition and support for the Madrid conference, and the 2002 "Arab initiative" specifying the terms for a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel. More often than not, however, relations between the three countries were fraught with suspicion and disagreement, undermining the prospects of a coherent Arab bloc which could exert influence in regional affairs. Egypt's decision to pursue a separate peace with Israel in the late 1970s was a historic departure from past Arab policies, and a decade would pass before Arab states would officially acquiesce and fully restore Egypt to the Arab fold. Syria's domination of Lebanon for three decades was never looked upon kindly by other Arab states, let alone in present times, for Syria has enabled the non-Arab, Shi'ite Islamic Republic of Iran to gain an important foothold there, and thus immensely complicate regional affairs.

Syria's embrace of Iran goes back to the February 1979 Islamic revolution and overthrow of the pro-American and pro-Israeli Shah, heralding a tectonic shift in regional fault lines, and providing Syria with a potentially important regional ally vis-a-vis Israel, the West, and Arab rivals. Many analysts continue to point to what they view as an unnatural and "unholy" alliance between an ethnically Persian Iran ruled by Shi'ite clerics and a secular Arab nationalist Syrian regime which claims to embody "the beating heart of Arabism." But this alliance has proven to be extremely durable, providing Syria with important economic assistance and strategic backup, while Iran acquired a valuable Arab ally which legitimated its entry into the region. The immediate consequence of the alliance was Syria's support for non-Arab Iran in its war against Arab Iraq between 1980-88, notwithstanding this violation of a cardinal principle of Arabism; as the war shifted in Iran's favor, Syria's President Hafiz al-Asad found himself increasingly isolated from other Arab states. However, Asad the father always played a delicate balancing game, avoiding too close an embrace of Iran while pursuing a "half-open door policy", keeping his options open as much as possible towards fellow Arab states, Iran, and even Turkey and Israel.

Under Bashar al-Asad, however, the tone and tenor of Syrian foreign policy has shifted, becoming more strident and less nuanced. To be sure, Syria signed on to the Arab peace initiative at the Beirut summit in 2002, albeit not before employing extremely inflammatory rhetoric towards Yasir Arafat and insisting on uncompromising language regarding the possible resettlement of Palestinian refugees. Syria also reconfirmed its adherence to the initiative at the 2007 Riyadh Arab summit, and reluctantly joined a broad Arab coalition at the US-sponsored Annapolis conference in fall 2007 designed to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. However, the primary focus of its foreign policy has remained Lebanon, to the acute distress of other Arab states. The February 2005 assassination of Hariri, the periodic killings of other anti-Syrian Lebanese figures, and Syria's continued efforts to maintain its domination there, even after being forced by the international community to officially withdraw its military forces, has left an especially bad taste in Saudi and Egyptian mouths. The convergence of the Lebanese and Iranian tracks of Syrian foreign policy came in summer 2006, with the Hizballah-Israeli war. Sunni Arab governments, led by Riyadh, Cairo and Amman were incensed over what they understood to be the geo-political underpinnings of the war, pitting an ever-more emboldened Iran against Israel in a battle for regional advantage at the expense of the Lebanese, with dire implications for other Arab states. Bashar's scornful characterization of other Arab leaders as "half-men" added insult to injury. Since then, Syria's support of the Iranian-Hizballah axis, reinforced by other allies in the Lebanese mosaic, has led Lebanon to its current impasse, placing it on the brink of renewed internal conflagration. Consequently, Syrian-Saudi relations have reached an unprecedented low point, with open Saudi expressions of support for former Syrian Vice President Khaddam's efforts to mobilize an opposition movement, the recalling of the Saudi ambassador from Damascus for consultations, and Riyadh's warning to its citizens to leave Lebanon. Syrian-Egyptian relations have now reached a new low as well, as Egypt has accused Syria of pressing Hamas and Islamic Jihad to reject Egyptian efforts to broker a Gaza ceasefire, so that escalating violence in Gaza takes the spotlight off of Syrian responsibility for the Lebanese impasse.

But Bashar al-Asad seems unfazed by the rumblings from Riyadh and Cairo, determined to maintain his close strategic relations with Iran and unwilling to countenance a political settlement in Lebanon which does not give his allies there veto power over governmental decisions. As such, he is endangering the success of the summit which he is preparing to host (it would be the first all-Arab summit ever held in Damascus). His willingness to take such a risk speaks volumes of the diminished symbolic capital to be earned through the

hosting of a successful summit, and of the declining importance of even paying lip service to a broad Arab consensus on major issues. Truth be told, Syria has always claimed to be the best representative of fundamental norms of Arabism, but has more often than not found itself ranged against a majority Arab coalition on key issues. Now, it seems that even arguing about collective Arab norms is no longer deemed to have much value by either Syria or its Arab opponents. Without those norms as markers to help shape their policies, and without meaningful leverage from either Cairo or Riyadh on Damascus, the Arab system is more adrift than ever, with key states unable to forge meaningful coalitions to check Iran's bid for increased regional power. Even if the forthcoming Damascus summit does take place in the end, this underlying reality is unlikely to change any time soon.

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