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Mixed Messages and Open Friction: The Arab League Summit in Damascus, 2008

By Sami Moubayed

The latest Arab Summit in Damascus was preceded and accompanied by intense diplomatic wrangling and threats of a boycott, all geared to pressure the Syrian hosts to change their position towards the political crisis in Lebanon. Yet, the Syrians scored a partial success by holding the meeting on time and by demonstrating that they will not easily yield to pressure, argues Syrian analyst Sami Moubayed. According to Moubayed, the confrontation over the summit and Lebanon should be seen as part of a larger and complex regional power game, played out in several interconnected theaters between the US and its Arab allies on one side and Iran and Syria on the other.



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The latest Arab summit, held in the Syrian capital Damascus on March 29 and 30, was yet another stop of the long drawn-out campaign, waged since 2003 by the US with the assistance of some of its Arab allies with the aim to isolate Syria, and with it Iran. Amongst calls for a boycott from both the US and prominent Arab leaders and with little hope for progress on any of the key issues – such as Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine - attention focused almost exclusively on the question whether the meeting would be held at all, and if so, at what level of representation. While only eleven Arab countries were represented at a presidential or royal level, major Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt sent delegations at a junior level, in a move clearly designed to express their misgivings about Syria's purported influence in Lebanon, a country that has been without a president since November 2007. Lebanon itself was completely absent.

Present Absentee: The Lebanese Crisis

For media sympathetic to the Lebanese government and/or controlled by Saudi interest, the verdict was unequivocal: the summit was a resounding failure, witness the less than impressive attendance, and Syria as the host country was paying the price for the lack of progress on the presidential elections in Lebanon, which the Saudis, the French and the Americans are blaming on the Syrians. Damascus, on the other hand, points out that it has supported the current candidate, Army Commander Michel Suleiman, from Day One. Some observers of the Syrian scene claim that Syria is really a scapegoat which the regional players are hitting since they cannot pick a fight with the real party-pooper, Iran. Supporters of this theory claim that despite being strategic allies, Syria and Iran follow different agendas in Lebanon: while Iran would prefer former Army Commander Michel Aoun, the ally of their

proxy Hezbollah, to become president, the Syrians do not trust Aoun due to his involvement in the anti-Syrian campaign of the 1990s and the drafting of the "Syria Accountability Act" in 2003. For his part, the ex-General has muted his criticism of Syria and allied himself with Hezbollah, hoping that through their political and demographic weight they could make him President. Hezbollah in turn aims at maintaining its power, arms, and influence, and, being identified clearly as a Shiite movement, needs allies from other communities to prevail in the multi-confessional environment of Lebanon.

In response to the deadlock in Beirut, the president of Egypt and the kings of Saudi Arabia and Jordan decided to shun Damascus. President Husni Mubarak told the Saudi channel, al-Arabiyya: "We should not be [in Damascus] resolving a problem that Syria is party to. A president must be elected in Lebanon before the Damascus Summit. Not solving this issue will mean failure for the summit." The Saudi press followed suit with a massive campaign against the Syrians through its popular satellite TV channels and daily newspapers such as al-Sharq al-Awsat. Meanwhile, the Syrians calibrated their response by restricting the use of explicitly anti-Saudi rhetoric to ostensibly private media outlets, while official media maintained a moderate, pan-Arabist tone, calling for a summit that should be a forum for dialogue with "open hearts and an enlightened mind". The back-channel to the Saudis was kept open and efforts were made to dispatch Foreign Minister Walid al-Mouallem to officially invite King Abdullah and Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal. Reportedly, the Saudis declined giving him an appointment, forcing the Syrians to send a middle-level government minister instead of the Foreign Minister to submit the invitation to the Saudis. Negative signs kept coming from Saudi Arabia, the last of which was the withdrawal of the Saudi ambassador to Syria during the last week of February.

The Syrian Perspective

The Syrians say that by actually holding the Summit— despite all kinds of pressure—they actually scored a point in their stand-off with the Americans, the Saudis, and the Lebanese. In their view, victory # 1 meant not having to postpone the Summit for two months, as suggested by Amr Mousa, secretary-general of the Arab League. After months of preparation, too much was at stake—morally, financially, and psychologically—for the Syrians to call off the Summit. As one Syrian observer put it, “they will hold it even if nothing but consuls show up!” As it turned out, some countries did indeed reduce their presence to such levels, but Lebanon was left alone with its decision for an outright boycott. Victory # 2 was foiling a pre-emptive summit that was scheduled in Sharm al-Sheikh, to gather all states that planned to boycott the Damascus Summit. Victory # 3 was that the Syrians succeeded in preventing the Summit from becoming a forum to deal with the Lebanese crisis, as preferred by the Saudis and the Lebanese government, at the expense of issues of equal or even bigger magnitude, such as Palestine and Iraq.

Lowest Turn-out in Arab League History?

Much commotion has been made about this Summit being the one with the lowest turn-out in Arab League history since World War II. True, the turn-out was low with only eleven heads of state attending — but it was neither the lowest in the history of the Arab League, nor was it substantially below the average: both the Beirut Summit of 2002 and the Summit at Sharm al-Sheikh of 2003 (hosted, after all, by Arab heavyweight Egypt) were attended by only ten heads of state, while the Tunis Summit of 2004 summoned 14 and the 2005 Summit of Algiers 13 leaders. Only the Riyadh Summit of 2007 scored an all-time high of 17 heads of state, no doubt because

of the considerable influence that Saudi Arabia enjoys in the Arab World, but also because this summit came shortly after the Israeli-Hizbullah War in Lebanon of 2006. Some said that the only reason this Summit took place in Syria was that King Abdullah, the host in 2007, intended a gesture of goodwill towards President Bashar al-Asad, to get him to cooperate on Lebanon and bring him back into the “Arab family” away from Iran. Such readings point out that no summit ever took place in Syria since the Arab League was founded in 1944. However, and while a summit was in fact convened in Damascus in 1948 (albeit not under the auspices of the Arab League) gathering all those Arab leaders whose forces were engaged in combat in the Palestine War, prior to the Amman Summit in 2001, Arab summits were neither in alphabetical order, nor were they regular.

An Exercise in Mixed Messages

On the face of it, the Summit and its proceedings appear as yet another installment in the long-standing confrontation of two camps with diametrically opposed views on the future of the region and little if any room for dialogue and compromise between them. However, at a closer glance things appear far less clear-cut: While regional heavyweights with close ties to the US such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt reduced their presence, both the ruling emirs of Qatar and Kuwait attended. Both of them are very close to the Americans, as are Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas and – as of late - Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi. The Americans did talk some Arabs into not attending, especially as Dick Cheney and Condoleezza Rice were touring the region right before and during the Summit, and convinced the King of Bahrain and the President of Yemen of not going. Similar pressure was presumably applied on Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Malki, who changed course at the last minute, claiming that he was too busy fighting the Mehdi Army in

Basra. Still, all three sent high-level delegations and declined to follow the Saudi and Egyptian lead of open hostility to the meeting and its hosts.

This means one of three things: (1) Either the US applied only mild pressure - weak enough so that even close allies such as the Qataris and the Kuwaitis felt comfortable ignoring it. This however appears unlikely in the light of the intense diplomacy preceding the summit and running parallel to it. (2) If serious pressure was indeed applied on all or most allies of the US, then some of them simply decided to defy it - an unlikely scenario, given the track record of close cooperation and dependence on the US of such rulers as Mahmoud Abbas or the Emir of Kuwait. (3) The most likely scenario however appears to be that the US applied pressure on some states while relaxing it on others, with the intention to keep a back channel open with the Syrians and demonstrating the cost of confrontation versus the benefits of cooperation, both at the same time. They still need Syria for a variety of stakes, including Lebanon, and resistance groups in Palestine that are allied to the Syrians, like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. America's main concern, however, is cooperation on security in Iraq. They believe that the keys to curbing the insurgency are to be found in Damascus, given the long border of 605 km between Iraq and Syria and the strong relations that Syria enjoys with the Sunni tribes of Iraq. According to such a reading, the Americans actually wanted states like Saudi Arabia and Egypt to take a tough stance, and others like Qatar and Kuwait to be more lenient with the Syrians.

This tactics of double-messaging has been apparent for several months now. While the Summit was taking place, the 10th report on the assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Harriri was handed to UN Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon. By verbal gentleman's agreement, the Syrians had

requested to read every report before it gets leaked to the press, ever since the dramatic 2005 report of the German persecutor Detlev Mehlis. The international community complied under his successor Serge Brammertz, but refrained to do so now - worrying the Syrians. As it turns out, the Report is a bust with nothing critical of the Syrians - just enough suspense to keep them on the alert. Not only does it not say anything bad about Syria, it also praises the Syrians for cooperating with the UN probe. The same strategy applies to the Summit. The Americans pressure the Saudis and Egyptians not to go, but said nothing to the Qataris and Kuwaitis.

The Syrians on their side are learning the game. They repeatedly say that current Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad al-Siniora is illegitimate (because the Hizbullah-led opposition has walked out on him since 2006). Yet so as not to be accused of hampering the Summit, they invited him to attend, albeit in a less than befitting manner - relaying the message through the resigned Lebanese Minister of Foreign affairs, while Siniora himself and the acting Foreign Minister were abroad. That was message # 1. Siniora did not attend - nor did anybody from Lebanon - but prepared a speech to be broadcasted at the Summit. The Syrians refused, claiming that nations not represented at the Summit do not have the right to address the assembled leaders. By openly confronting Damascus, the Lebanese were left out in the cold - that was message # 2. Then, to fight back accusations of being bias towards any particular party, the Syrians allowed the Future TV of Saad al-Harriri to cover the Summit—which has been saying a lot of bad things about Syria since 2005. That was message # 3 in a tit-for-tat over protocol and diplomatic formalities that the Syrians master so well.

In the complex Middle Eastern game around the exceedingly intertwined conflict theaters in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and

Iraq, all sides are keeping their cards close to their chests. Syria appears to be comfortable in confronting Arab heavyweights as Egypt and Saudi-Arabia by relying on regional substitutes like Turkey and Iran, sub-state actors such as Hamas and Hizbullah, and to some extent on fellow Arabs who have issues of their own with the regional power houses in Riyadh and Cairo, as in the case of Qatar. When it comes to the US, Damascus

appears confident that the current administration has come around – as any administration inevitably will - to Henry Kissinger's famous dictum: in the Middle East, there will be no solution without, leave alone against Syria. Beyond its unremarkable and formulaic results – true to the form of most Arab Summits -, the Damascus Summit once again served to make that point..