

Harmonious Discord Likely at Doha Arab Summit

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On Monday, the annual Arab Summit will convene in Doha, Qatar, a meeting that may become a media circus if invited Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir -- recently indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for murdering nearly a half million of his countrymen in Darfur -- attends. Nonetheless, for participating Arab states, al-Bashir will likely be a sideshow overshadowed by a resurgent Syria, a regionally ascendant Iran, and a continuing and increasingly less solvable intra-Palestinian crisis.

Background

Arab summits have traditionally showcased regional disputes; the Doha summit is unlikely to change that pattern. The last meeting of Arab leaders occurred at the end of the Israeli military offensive in Gaza this past January. Qatar had requested an emergency Arab summit, but disagreements among states over Hamas resulted in only fourteen of twenty-two member states attending, leaving the meeting one short of a quorum for an "Arab Summit."

Gaza was discussed during the Arab Economic Summit convened in Kuwait later that month. While the Arab states pledged \$2 billion toward Gaza's reconstruction, discord prevailed as to whether funds would be disbursed through Hamas or Fatah. Intra-Arab differences also persisted about whether the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which promises Arab recognition for Israel after an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord is reached, should remain on the table.

The most important development to emerge from Kuwait was the thawing of Saudi-Syrian relations, which deteriorated following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier (and Saudi citizen) Rafiq Hariri, a crime widely believed to have been perpetrated by Damascus.

Intra-Arab Reconciliation

After the opening ceremony of the Kuwait gathering, Saudi's King Abdullah met with the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Bahrain, and Qatar, in addition to Arab League Secretary-General Amr Mousa, to discuss reconciliation between Western-oriented and Iranian-allied states. The Kuwait meeting was followed by a mini-summit hosted by the king in Riyadh on March 11, attended by Egypt, Kuwait, and Syria. The goal, reportedly, was to "clear the air."

Few details from the Riyadh meeting have emerged, but both the atmospherics and the post-meeting statements, which described the summit as "a start of a new phase in relations in which the four nations will endeavor to serve Arab interests through cooperation," suggest at least a temporary decrease in tensions.

Despite appearances, however, differences -- particularly regarding Iran and support for "resistance" -- persist. Syria continues to refuse suggestions that it change the strategic nature of its relationship with Iran and is pressing Egypt and Saudi Arabia to adopt a more sympathetic stance toward "resistance groups." In an interview with al-Safir on March 25, Syrian president Bashar al-Asad downplayed progress on reconciliation, likening the process to an airplane that "took off . . . [but] if the engines power subside[s], the plane will collapse."

Palestinian Disunity

While Syria is mending fences with neighbors, efforts to foster Palestinian reconciliation remain stalled. Continued divisions between Hamas and Fatah are not surprising; they represent the wider and persistent divisions in the Arab world between the moderate and militant camps. In recent months, the parties have been engaged in talks in Cairo to forge a Palestinian national unity government, but the talks have deadlocked, if not collapsed, and it is unlikely that the Doha Summit will succeed where Cairo failed.

Hamas-Fatah relations are particularly strained going into the summit. Just last week in Lebanon, Kamal Medhat, deputy to Abbas Zaki, the Palestine Liberation Organization representative in Beirut, was assassinated. There are few clues as to who perpetrated the murder, but Medhat was considered an important Fatah operator in the Palestinian refugee camps, and his loss is sure to strengthen the relative position of Hamas. Given the heightened tensions, it will be difficult to rhetorically paper over these differences at the summit as per standard practice.

Despite these problems, Palestinian-related issues dominate the Doha Summit agenda. Among the summit's topics will be continuing Arab League support for the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, pressing for a UN "war crimes" probe of Israeli conduct during the Gaza campaign, ending the "unfair Israeli blockade" of Gaza, and reaffirming Palestinian refugees so-called "right of return" per UN General Assembly Resolution 194. The agenda, however, does not mention the more controversial matter of Palestinian unity. Given the full slate of issues and lack of consensus, Arab leaders are likely to keep the Arab Peace Initiative on the table but make little effort to operationalize the plan.

Syria Resurgent

Perhaps more than anything else, the Doha Summit will showcase the improved standing of Syria. One month after Washington initiated a dialogue with Damascus, long-isolated Syria has made significant headway in reinsinuating itself into the Arab system. Problems still remain. but al-Asad, who months ago strolled the Champs Elysees with French president Nicholas Sarkozy, is now walking the palaces of Riyadh.

The al-Asad regime continues to face two significant challenges: the International Tribunal prosecuting the Hariri assassins, which opened in the Hague earlier this month, and the International Atomic Energy Agency investigation into the alleged Syrian nuclear facility in Kibar. Despite its problems, the regime is clearly hoping that the perception of increased international legitimacy will insulate Damascus from some of the worst consequences.

Meanwhile, Syria is taking steps to exploit its growing international acceptance. Just last week, Syria announced the appointment of its first-ever ambassador to Lebanon, a move that has been widely applauded. At the same time, however, in Lebanon, where elections are ten weeks away, it appears the assassinations are starting again. In addition to the murder last week of Medhat, it was reported on March 24 that security forces interdicted a car bomb plot against pro-West March 14 leader (and former president) Amin Gemayel. Preliminary reports suggest that the arrested owner of the car was Syrian.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given Syria's improved status within the Arab League, the topic of Lebanese elections does not appear on the agenda. Syria, however, did manage to insert two items into the program: a reaffirmation of Arab opposition to U.S. economic sanctions on Syria and a condemnation of "the attempts aimed at politicizing the principles of justice." The second point reflects Syria's rejection of the Hariri Tribunal, echoing al-Asad's recent threat that if the tribunal were politicized, "Lebanon would be the first to pay the price."

Bashir and Bashar

The condemnation of "politicizing the principles of justice" is also an apparent reference to Omar al-Bashir, who was indicted by the International Criminal Court on seven counts of war crimes in Darfur and crimes against humanity, including murder, rape, and torture. Al-Bashir is obviously not going to cooperate with the ICC. Neither, apparently, is the Arab League. Despite an arrest warrant issued on March 4, al-Bashir traveled to Cairo on March 25 for a meeting with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak; a day later, he met with Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qadhafi in Tripoli.

Qatari prime minister and foreign minister Shaikh Hamad bin Jassem, who delivered the official invitation to al-Bashir on March 24, said Qatar had been pressured not to issue an invitation. Nevertheless, Qatar is not a signatory to the ICC, and the Arab League will not enforce the international arrest warrant against al-Bashir. As Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa said of the warrant, "We in the presidency of the Arab League have a clear position on this request and we totally reject it." Indeed, according to the Arab League statement, the charges brought by the ICC are an illegal violation of Sudanese sovereignty.

Conclusion

Fearing capture enroute, in the end al-Bashir may not attend the summit. Ironically, however, given the continued divisions facing the Arab world on Iran and the Palestinians, support for al-Bashir vis-a-vis the ICC may be the one issue -- in addition to the perennial condemnations of Israel -- on which the Arab summit in Doha may reach consensus. Given the low expectations, the best outcome for Washington would be that the summit, which almost certainly will lend its imprimatur to an indicted Sudanese war criminal, will not further legitimize Hamas.

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