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From Beirut to Algiers: The Arab League's Role in the Lebanon Crisis

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Brief Analysis

Arab leaders meet in Algiers on March 22 for an Arab League summit, at a moment of high tension within Lebanon over the pace and extent of Syria's military withdrawal and the future domestic political map. Despite the important roles many of the summiteers have played in urging Damascus to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1559, the summit itself is expected to offer little support to the push for full withdrawal.

A History of Disregarding Lebanese Interests

The League of Arab States was founded in Cairo in 1945 to promote the political, social, and cultural interests of member countries. Since then, it has served as a forum for Arab leaders to coordinate their policy positions and deliberate on matters of common concern. Although Lebanon was among the League's founding members, its relationship with the organization has traditionally been defined by regional politics and the interests of the country's more powerful neighbor, Syria. Indeed, despite the difficult moments Lebanon has faced over the decades, the League has rarely, if ever, played a constructive role in times of domestic or regional crisis.

For example, the small-scale civil war that erupted in Lebanon in 1958 was ended not by any inter-Arab action but rather by the landing of U.S. Marines on Lebanese soil, which came at the request of then-president Camille Chamoun. In 1969, the Arab League stood in the shadow of Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser when he supervised the signing of the Cairo Agreement, under which Lebanon was obliged to permit Palestinians to bear arms so that they could carry on their aggression against Israel. The result was that Lebanese territory became home base for the "popular struggle," culminating in the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organization's state-within-a-state inside the country.

During Lebanon's major civil war (1975–1990), the Arab League essentially promoted Syrian interests and hegemony in Lebanon. Syrian troops entered Lebanon in summer 1976, supposedly to help bring stability to the country. Following an Arab peace conference in Riyadh, the League met in Cairo in October of that year to deal with the Lebanese crisis. There, the League legitimized Syria's presence in Lebanon by establishing the Arab Deterrent Force (ADF)—of the 30,000 ADF troops deployed in Lebanon, 27,000 were Syrian. Even as it responded quickly to Syrian interests, the League routinely dismissed Lebanon's own requests. Between 1976 and 1982, Lebanese president Elias Sarkis made two requests to have Syrian troops removed from Lebanon. The first was a government memorandum addressed to the League in 1981 requesting that the ADF not be renewed. The second was a government memorandum as well, the so-called "Lebanese Working Paper." This document, issued two months after Israel's June 1982 invasion of Lebanon, asked the Arab states for an official decision ending the mission of the Syrian forces in Lebanon. Although the memorandum was taken up at the Fez Summit in September 1982, Arab leaders made no decision on it. The League did, however, condemn Israel's incursions, as it had when Israel launched the more limited Operation Litani in 1978. Subsequently, the League came to support Hizballah as a resistance movement.

In March 1989, Lebanese general Michel Aoun, appointed by outgoing president Amin Jumayil to head an executive cabinet until a new president was elected, proclaimed a "liberation war" against Syria. Damascus responded by shelling the Christian region of Lebanon and imposing a blockade. In view of the constitutional impasse and the escalation of hostilities, the Arab League endorsed the efforts of Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco to formulate solutions. Lebanese deputies traveled to the Saudi city of Taif to hold national reconciliation talks. There, with the intercession of delegates from the three aforementioned countries, the deputies managed to introduce significant amendments to the Lebanese constitution and to provide a framework for Lebanese-Syrian relations, including Syrian withdrawal. Returning to Lebanon, they ratified the Taif Accord on November 4 and elected Rene Mouawad as president the following day. Eighteen days later, Mouawad died in a Beirut car bombing for which most observers held Syria responsible. He was succeeded by two pro-Syrian presidents, Elias Hrawi (1990–1998) and Emile Lahoud (1998–present). Over the years, the League showed little interest in promoting the implementation of the Taif Accord, to which it lent its legitimacy in 1989.

The League did side with Beirut with regard to Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon. When the UN Security Council certified the pullout as having fulfilled Israel's obligation under Resolution 425, the League convened in Cairo in October 2000 and issued a statement endorsing the view of the Lebanese government, supported by Syria, that the withdrawal was incomplete, since Israel still occupied Lebanese territories (mainly the Shebaa Farms). This statement gave tacit legitimacy to continued Hizballah attacks against Israel. The League said nothing, however, about growing Lebanese calls for Syrian withdrawal, failing to encourage even the Taif Accord's call for phased redeployments of troops.

In the Wake of the Hariri Assassination

The inter-Arab deference to Syria began to crack in September 2004 over UN Security Council Resolution 1559, introduced by France and the United States after Damascus strongarmed Lebanon into amending its constitution to permit the extension of Lahoud's term. Algeria, the Council's lone Arab representative, abstained from voting on the resolution, permitting it to pass without opposition. The fissures deepened in February 2005 following the

assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, which provoked large anti-Syrian demonstrations that toppled the pro-Syrian government of Omar Karami. Several Arab leaders, including President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, publicly urged Syria to implement the Taif Accord and withdraw from Lebanon. They gave no indication of how soon a withdrawal might come, though. In fact, when Arab foreign ministers met in Cairo recently in preparation for the Algiers summit, they downplayed the impact of the ongoing crisis on Lebanon's unity and stability.

Yet, in a move reflecting Arab concern about possible international intervention in Lebanon to certify Syrian withdrawal and monitor parliamentary elections, Mubarak made a swift visit to Damascus to discuss the situation ahead of the summit. Significantly, he was accompanied by Omar Suleiman, head of Egypt's General Intelligence. According to Arabic press accounts of the agenda for the summit, the League will condemn Israel for continuing to occupy Lebanese lands and detaining Lebanese; support Lebanon's stability and sovereignty; urge strengthening of Arab "brotherly relations," especially the "special" Lebanese-Syrian relationship; and reject all "pressures" on Lebanon. It is not clear whether the League will even welcome Syria's decision to withdraw in line with the Taif Accord and Resolution 1559.

It is possible that the League may express its readiness to send Arab monitors to supervise the Lebanese elections. In so doing, it may be trying to set a precedent for future regional elections (e.g., Egypt's presidential election next September) that may help local rulers fend off calls for international observation. At the same time, if history is any guide, the League will emphasize its support for Lebanon's "constitution and institutions"—codewords for safeguarding Syria's influence there by bolstering the power of the incumbent president. Lahoud himself has cancelled his trip to Algiers, fearing civil unrest at home in the wake of the March 19 explosion that shook a predominantly Christian suburb of Beirut. Conventional wisdom in the capital views such terrorist acts as a pre-summit gambit by Syria to raise the specter of internal strife, a way of showing that Syria's withdrawal will trigger a resumption of past conflicts.

Conclusion

Lebanese looking for international support for their efforts to force a full and speedy Syrian withdrawal will be unlikely to find succor at the Arab League summit in Algiers. Although the Arab leaders who have legitimized Syria's dominant role in Lebanon for so many years have no love lost for President Bashar al-Asad, they are reluctant to feed the U.S. and Western drive for political reform and structural change within Arab countries.

Robert G. Rabil is a visiting professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University and author of *Embattled Neighbors: Israel, Syria, and Lebanon* (Lynne Reiner, 2003). ❖

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