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The Damascus Arab Summit: Arab Divisions Ensure Modest Achievements

By [David Schenker](#)
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This weekend, the much-anticipated annual Arab Summit will convene in Damascus. The run-up to the twentieth summit -- the first ever held in Damascus -- has been overshadowed by the controversy surrounding Syria's role in undermining Lebanon's presidential elections. And Damascus has exacerbated regional concerns by inviting Iran to attend the summit. As a result of these developments, several Arab states have downgraded their planned level of representation at the meeting, dashing for now Syria's hopes of improving its tarnished image in the Arab world. Given these tensions, it is likely that this summit -- like so many of its predecessors -- will fail to make good on its ambitious agenda.

Lebanon Casts a Shadow

Lebanon has been without a chief executive since the departure of Syrian-backed president Emile Lahoud in November 2007. Initially, the "March 14" anti-Syrian majority had sought to elect its candidate of choice, but fears of violence left it unwilling to directly challenge the Hizballah-led, Syrian-backed opposition. After months of Arab League mediation, the March 14 coalition and Hizballah seemingly reached a compromise: the election of Gen. Michel Suleiman, the Syrian-anointed chief of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Shortly after his selection, however, the pro-Syrian opposition rejected the Arab League initiative and revoked its support for Suleiman (see [PolicyWatch no. 1336](#)).

In an effort to resolve the presidential crisis prior to the summit, dozens of Arab delegations have passed through Beirut in recent months. Despite generating a great deal of buzz, the visits failed to end the stalemate. Saudi Arabia and Egypt in particular tried to use the summit as leverage to lift Syria's opposition to a solution, but Damascus refused to budge. As Syrian foreign minister Walid Mualem told the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat* in mid-January, Damascus would "not sacrifice its interests and positions [on Lebanon] for the success of the summit." Eventually, Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa publicly blamed Syria (and Iran) for scuttling the deal and prolonging the crisis.

Impact on Summit Attendance

Typically, Arab League summits are attended by heads of state. Earlier this week, however, when it became clear that an end to Syrian meddling in Lebanon was not imminent, Saudi Arabia broke ranks and indicated it would downgrade its delegation. Instead of King Abdullah, Riyadh decided -- in a clear snub to Damascus -- to dispatch Ahmed Qatan, its representative to the Arab League. Several other states have followed suit. Egypt's delegation will be led by the relatively unknown State Minister for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs Mufid Shehab, while Algeria will reportedly send its foreign minister and Jordan its information minister. An announcement from Morocco is pending, but it seems a forgone conclusion that King Muhammad VI will not show.

Damascus does not appear particularly concerned about the dearth of senior-level Arab participation in the

event. President Bashar al-Asad seemingly dared his Arab allies to boycott the summit when he invited Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad to attend. According to Syrian prime minister Nijih Atari, Damascus is intent on "deepening [its] strategic cooperation" with Tehran. Although Ahmadinezhad will not attend, Iranian foreign minister Manoucher Motaki will represent Iran among the twenty-two Arab delegations.

Despite the downgrading of key Arab delegations, several heads of state are slated to attend, including the president of Yemen as well as the emirs of Qatar and Kuwait. Libya, the sole Arab state to reject the Arab League compromise initiative and side with Syria, will be represented by Muammar Qadhafi. Conspicuously, however, Lebanon will not be represented at all. Recently, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora told the Lebanese daily *al-Nahar* that "No one can represent Lebanon [at the summit] except the president." On March 25, with no end to the crisis in sight, Beirut officially announced that it would boycott the summit.

How to Judge the Meeting

The summit agenda contains many perennial topics of discussion, ranging from condemnations of Israeli nuclear weapons to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. As is customary, the agenda was scripted in the weeks leading up to the gathering -- details for the Damascus summit were finalized during a March 11-13 meeting of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in Irbil, Iraq. A closer look at the IPU's resolutions from that meeting provides a window into how the Arab League will address -- or more likely avoid -- difficult issues this weekend. Some of the key issues to keep in mind when assessing the summit include:

Lebanon. In its final communique from the Irbil meeting, the IPU legitimizes Hizballah's right to retain its weapons, recommends a compromise solution to the presidential crisis via the Arab initiative, and calls for an end to external interference in Lebanese internal affairs. If the Arab League summit is to have an impact on Lebanon, it should build on the latter IPU resolution, condemning by name those states that are interfering in Lebanese affairs and recommending sanctions against them.

Syria. Ironically enough, the IPU communique follows its section on Lebanon with a section declaring Arab "solidarity with Syria." The document "rejects" pressure, sanctions, and efforts to "isolate" Damascus. Given Syria's pernicious role in Lebanon, the presence of this type of language in the final Arab Summit communique would be regrettable. Damascus seeks to use the summit to end its isolation; the Arab League should not give it that opportunity.

Palestinian issues. The IPU document calls for unity among Palestinian factions, but it does not mention Hamas by name or demand international recognition of the group. If the Arab Summit communique changes this formulation, it would represent a setback. The Arab League should, however, rectify the IPU's failure to mention another important issue: the 2002 Arab initiative toward peace and normalization with Israel.

Iraq. As with Lebanon, the IPU communique "rejects" external interference in Iraqi internal affairs and calls for the return of Arab diplomatic representation to Iraq. On the former point, the Arab Summit communique should name the interfering states -- like Iran -- to which the IPU's oblique language most likely refers. Consensus regarding the return of Arab diplomats would also be positive.

United Arab Emirates territorial issues. The IPU document supports the emirates' position on the territorial dispute over the three islands of Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa, occupied by Iran since 1971. Interestingly, Iraq made its first real post-Saddam foray into Arab politics by inserting a "note" of exception -- the only one in the twelve-page document -- differing from the consensus Arab position on the islands. In an apparent nod to Iran, Iraq urged a softer line, encouraging a bilateral dialogue between the "two Gulf Muslim states." It seems unlikely that this issue will make the Arab Summit communique, but if it does, a unified Arab position vis-a-vis Iran would be productive.

Conclusion

Arab League summits have a long history of division and inconclusiveness, and the Damascus meeting is unlikely to depart from that norm. The controversy surrounding this weekend's gathering is only the latest demonstration of the deep divisions in the Arab world. Unlike previous summits that were marked by intra-Arab disputes of a more personal (and less serious) nature -- between Libya and Saudi Arabia, for example -- this summit reflects more existential divisions related to Arab national security concerns.

For many Arab states, Lebanon represents a debate about regional trends -- in particular Tehran's growing role in Arab politics, a trend that threatens the long-term stability of "moderate" Arab regimes ostensibly aligned with the West. As such, Syria's profoundly unproductive role in Lebanon and its increasingly close ties with Iran provide the underlying context of this week's meeting.

Damascus had hoped that a successful summit would prove to be another nail in the coffin of U.S.-led efforts to isolate and pressure the Asad regime into changing its behavior. Contrary to Syria's wishes, however, the effective Arab boycott of the summit suggests that many Arab capitals -- like Washington -- are not ready to accept the re-integration of an Iranian-aligned Damascus into the Arab fold.

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