

PolicyWatch #1351

## Will the Damascus Arab Summit Be Convened?

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In the Middle East, it is widely believed that Syria is obstructing the election of a new Lebanese president. Amid this crisis, many are beginning to doubt whether the next Arab League summit, scheduled to open in Damascus at month's end, will take place at all.

### Lebanon Crisis

In key Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, many believe that Syria is responsible for the problems facing Lebanon. Not only is Damascus the prime suspect in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, but it has also interfered in the country's affairs to avoid the murder's consequences. Specifically, the formation of the international tribunal investigating the assassination has provoked fears in Damascus, leading the regime and its ally Hizballah to use brinkmanship and tacit threats of civil war as a means of destabilizing the Lebanese government.

One might think that electing a president is an exclusively domestic matter, but that has not been the case in Beirut for decades. Several external powers -- particularly Syria -- have long had a significant say. The current presidential void, which has been ongoing since October 2007, highlights the unproductive roles that Syria and Iran are playing. Late last year, Arab League secretary-general Amr Mousa proposed an initiative to defuse tensions in Lebanon, but Hizballah and other pro-Syrian forces contested it. Initially, Damascus had agreed to Gen. Michel Suleiman's election as president, but later backtracked, most likely because it came to view him as an unreliable "independent." Electing such a figure is a risk that Damascus is loath to take, since it wants to make sure that whoever becomes president will be under its influence.

### Arab League Summit

Recent events in Lebanon have compelled Arab states to consider whether or not to attend the Arab Summit in Damascus and, if they do, what level of representation is appropriate. Undoubtedly, convening the summit there confers the type of prestige that Syria is aching for, especially given the international pressure on its ruling elite. Yet, the Saudi, Egyptian, and Jordanian heads of state have agreed to participate only if Syria facilitates the election of a Lebanese president. Senior Jordanian officials maintain that King Abdullah was candid with Syrian foreign minister Walid Mualem in early February; the king made it clear that Jordan expects Syria to defuse the crisis in Lebanon, a tacit reminder that Jordanian attendance at the summit should not be taken for granted.

Two different viewpoints have emerged over these issues. The dominant view maintains that Syria is in a weak position and should therefore be pressured to facilitate the election as a quid pro quo for Egyptian-Jordanian-Saudi attendance at the summit. The other view reasons that if these key Arab states attend, it would encourage Syria to play a positive role in Lebanon. In either case, it is argued, Syria should not be left without an "Arab option," since that would likely spur it to become entrenched with Iran, a country that has assumed the key spoiler role in Lebanon. Consequently, the summit has become both a stick and a carrot for Syria.

Yet, it is unlikely that Syria will pressure its Lebanese allies simply for the sake of holding the Arab Summit in Damascus, as Syrian officials have repeatedly stated. In fact, Syria may hold the summit regardless of whether Cairo and Riyadh send delegations -- a move that both countries would view as a major affront. The Saudi government has already withdrawn its ambassador from Lebanon and asked its citizens to leave the country, a message that may lay the groundwork for a possible showdown. Indeed, many fear that holding the summit without key Arab states would exacerbate tensions and speed the movement toward civil war.

### **Recent Precedent for Boycott**

Reducing the level of representation at Arab Summits -- tantamount to a boycott from the Arab perspective -- is not a new development. Although all leaders of key Arab states attended the 2007 summit in Riyadh, it is not unusual for them to do otherwise. For instance, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and Saudi King Abdullah did not attend the 2006 summit in Khartoum; several leaders skipped the 2005 summit in Algiers, including those of Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Jordan; and Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi left early from the 2004 summit in Tunisia.

The usual reason for reduced representation is personal disagreement between leaders, but the current situation is different. If certain leaders do not attend this month's summit, it would be a sign of major division between key Arab countries on an important political issue. Furthermore, this division would fall between two axes: Syria and its radical allies (including Iran) on the one hand, and moderate Arab states on the other -- neither of which is willing to lose the battle over Lebanon. This invokes what Malcolm Kerr dubbed "the Arab Cold War."

A boycott by certain leaders would also have grave consequences for the Arab League. The already diminished institution would be looked down upon by the Arab masses, who would probably stop believing that it had a vital role to play in the region. Such a development would damage the league's image for a decade or longer.

### **Conclusion**

At present, it is not clear whether the summit will be held as scheduled, largely due to the wrangling between Saudi Arabia and Syria. Rightly or wrongly, Syria could cancel the summit and continue interfering in Lebanon to secure its interests and avert any developments that might pose a threat. Given the players' strategic calculations, it would be surprising if Syria conceded in Lebanon for the sake of holding an Arab Summit that is not expected to further its interests. Regardless of how the situation unfolds -- whether the summit is postponed until a new U.S. president takes office, or convened with full, partial, or no representation by key Arab states -- it is becoming increasingly clear that Lebanon, even if it attends, will not be the winner.

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