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Can Syria Come in from the Cold?

By Seth Wikas

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In the coming weeks, Syria will participate in two important regional conferences. On March 10, it will join Iraq's other neighbors and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in Baghdad. On March 28-29, it will participate in the Arab League summit in Riyadh. Syria's detractors continue to criticize Damascus for failing to seal the border with Iraq and for meddling in Lebanese internal affairs in violation of UN Security Resolution 1701. Of equal importance is the downturn in Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Last week's Saudi-Iranian summit has Damascus worried about its role in Lebanon and the possibility of an international tribunal on the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, a crime for which Syria is widely believed to be responsible. Will the upcoming conferences give Syria a chance to improve its regional standing, or will its isolation continue?

The Baghdad Conference

The March 10 meeting in Baghdad is aimed at curbing violence and promoting reconstruction and national reconciliation within Iraq. Syrian leaders are greeting the conference with cautious optimism and as a partial step toward diplomacy. They want to see full adoption of the Iraq Study Group (a.k.a. Baker-Hamilton) report's recommendation of direct American dialogue with Syria and Iran. Meanwhile, Washington appears committed to its policy of isolating the two nations, and President Bush has stated that the Baghdad conference will be a test of Syria and Iran's readiness to reduce sectarian violence in Iraq. Washington is not blind to the results of the Iraq war, however -- Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey is currently awaiting a visa to travel to Damascus, where she has been authorized to discuss *only* the status of Iraqi refugees in Syria. On the Syrian side, the editor-in-chief of the government daily *al-Baath*, Ilyas Murad, stated the need for Washington to admit its failure in Iraq at the conference, and also wondered how the United States could refuse to talk to other conference participants.

One constructive step Damascus has recently taken is to allow Iraqi refugees to renew their three-month residency permits. Yet official Iraqi sources point to Syria's continued role in undermining stability in Iraq. Last week, Iraq's UN ambassador, Hamid al-Bayati, called on Syria to control its border, as it is the entry point for most foreign fighters. He dismissed Syria's claims that it cannot adequately patrol its border until it receives the necessary surveillance equipment.

Saudi Arabia and the Arab Summit

Syria's relationship with Saudi Arabia has been strained at best since Syrian president Bashar al-Asad's August 15, 2006, speech in which he railed against Arab leaders who did not support Hizballah in the war against Israel -- notably Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. Asad described such leaders as "half men." The deterioration in their relations has been compounded by Syria's suspected involvement in the killing of Hariri, a Saudi citizen, and by Syria's implication of Saudi Arabia in the September 2006 attack on the U.S. embassy in Damascus. In December, Syrian vice president Farouk al-Shara attributed the strain to personal reasons: "We Arabs become angry and calm down quickly." In Saudi eyes, his statement trivialized the depth of the problems between the two states.

Most recently, the relationship suffered a flare-up after a caustic op-ed appeared in the Saudi-owned London daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat*. Although the newspaper consistently reflects the Saudi position on issues, and is notoriously anti-Syrian, Abdul Rahman al-Rashid's March 4 article pushed the envelope. A former editor of the paper, he outlined Saudi grievances -- including Asad's August speech and Syrian attempts to bring down the Lebanese government -- and claimed Syria had lost nearly everything in the Middle East as a result of its leadership's inexperience and miscalculations. He added that Syria was even risking its alliance with Iran and predicted the upcoming Arab Summit could not save Syria from a dark future.

For its part, Damascus has sought to project a very different image. According to Syrian sources, Saudi King Abdullah sent Asad a personal invitation to the Arab Summit via an emissary in February. Asad assured the emissary that he would attend and conveyed his personal respect for the king and the importance of the Saudi-Syrian relationship. The summit will include separate bilateral talks between Abdullah and Asad. In the wake of the invitation, the Syrian media has shown a noticeably more positive tone toward Saudi Arabia.

The media messages on both sides are important in light of recent talks between Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad and King Abdullah. Saudi Arabia is seeking Iranian support for the Hariri tribunal, and this worries Syria. It is unclear whether Tehran and Riyadh can find a solution to the Lebanese political crisis, and what pressure -- if any -- will be put on Syria to discontinue its interference in Lebanese affairs.

Syria's Relationship with Iran

The Syrian-Iranian relationship is under a great deal of pressure. Former Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad skillfully developed and nurtured alliances with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, helping to make Syria a key regional player. The alliance with Tehran worked well when Damascus saw Iran as an ally in the struggle against its old nemesis, Iraq, and as a source of inexpensive oil. In turn, Iran viewed Syria as a base for exporting the Islamic Revolution to Lebanese Shiites via Hizballah. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia benefited from the protection that both nations provided from Iraq. Bashar al-Asad, however, has turned Syria into a political liability for its allies and neighbors. He has angered the Saudis by meddling in Lebanese political affairs -- notably in the assassination of Hariri -- and has turned his country from a partner into a client of Iran. Asad has also voiced his open support and respect for Hizballah -- something his father never did -- and Damascus has lost the power it once had over the group. The result is that Syria's fortunes in Lebanon are now dependent on Hizballah's success, making Hizballah a partner, not a dependent.

In sum, Syria's new position in relation to both Iran and Hizballah has weakened its political clout. Asad also fears that the recent Iranian-Saudi summit yielded Tehran's assent to the international tribunal on Hariri, which would further debilitate the Syrian regime. Neither the Saudis nor the Iranians want to see Asad fall, but an international tribunal and a settling of the Lebanese political crisis (to Syria's disadvantage) would strip Damascus of many of its political cards.

Conclusion

The upcoming Baghdad conference and Arab Summit highlight the various challenges facing Syria. Given its record, Syria is unlikely to play a constructive role in Iraq -- but this does not interest Damascus. Instead, its primary goals are to block the international tribunal on the Hariri assassination and ensure that Hizballah gains more power in the Lebanese parliament. Even if it achieves its objectives, however, Damascus has badly damaged its relations with allies and regional neighbors, and these will take time to heal. Internationally, Syria is hoping to bypass continued U.S. opposition to direct diplomacy by strengthening its military and economic ties with Russia. Regionally, neither of the upcoming meetings are likely to reduce Syria's isolation, improve its image, or change its leadership's demonstrated inability to balance competing political interests.

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