

PolicyWatch #1215

The Riyadh Arab Summit: Multiple Issues and High Expectations

By [David Schenker](#) and [Simon Henderson](#)

March 27, 2007

On March 28, the Arab League will convene the annual summit of its twenty-two member states in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Despite a record of disunity and inconclusiveness, this annual meeting of Arab leaders remains the subject of intense interest in the region. Rising Sunni-Shiite tensions, talk of a peace opening with Israel, and developments in Iraq, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and Lebanon have generated more attention for this year's summit than usual.

Background

Two Arab summits were convened in 2006. In June, an emergency meeting was held following Hamas's kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit and the subsequent Israeli incursion into Gaza. The meeting concluded with a unanimous condemnation of Israel's military action. Some four months prior, Arab leaders gathered in Khartoum for the annual Arab Summit. Highlights from that meeting's final communique included a pledge to provide \$55 million per month in funding for the internationally isolated, Hamas-tainted PA; a condemnation of the Syria Accountability Act (a congressional sanctions measure targeting Syria for undermining stability in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories); and praise for Hizballah as a "resistance" organization, over the objection of pro-Western Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora. The communiqué was issued just one month before Hizballah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and sparked a war. Although the summit took place in the Sudanese capital, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur was just a footnote.

Saudi Diplomacy in High Gear

In the months leading up to this year's summit, Saudi diplomatic activism has surprised the region, eclipsing, at least temporarily, the traditional Egyptian role in Arab politics. Led by Saudi National Security Council chief and former ambassador to Washington Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the kingdom brokered the Mecca accord between the warring Palestinian Fatah and Hamas factions and worked with Iran to try to mediate a solution to the impasse in Lebanon. Riyadh also condemned Hizballah for its provocation last summer and, more recently, hinted at the possibility of Saudi intervention in support of Iraqi Sunnis should Shiites get the upper hand.

Another aspect of this relatively robust Saudi foreign policy is the Arab Peace Initiative, formerly known as the Saudi Initiative. It is believed that the Saudis will move to "reactivate" this initiative at the Arab Summit, building on last September's secret but widely reported meeting between Prince Bandar and Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert. For the Saudis, a deal with Israel would be an insurance policy vis-à-vis a predatory Shiite Iran. For Israel, however, the seemingly innocuous land-for-peace deal is a nonstarter, as it includes provisions for Palestinians' "right of return" to their homes in Israel. Both Arab League and Saudi officials say that no modifications will be made to the plan.

The Riyadh meeting will be a real test for the new Saudi diplomacy. The challenge will be for the Saudis to turn the Arab Peace Initiative from a position -- i.e., Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines in exchange for peace and normalization with Arab states -- into a proposal that is acceptable to Israel and that could eventually

become a framework for negotiations. To this end, it has been reported that if Israel were to agree in principle to King Abdullah's 2002 peace initiative, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan would establish a committee to repackage that plan with softened conditions, presumably regarding right of return. Thus far, however, this potential proposal has been couched in vague terms that do not inspire U.S. or Israeli confidence. Weeks after forging an inter-Palestinian agreement based on compromise, what strategy will King Abdullah pursue to forge consensus among Arab leaders on these controversial issues?

Parochial Interests

It will be difficult to find common ground among the Arab states. According to the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*, the top items under discussion will be "support for the rights of Palestinians, the unity of Lebanon, and peace for Iraq." Not surprisingly, however, each state comes to the summit with its own separate priorities as well:

Syria. Damascus has two main priorities. First, it would like to use the opportunity to patch up its bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia, which has deteriorated markedly since the November 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri -- a crime for which Syria is largely believed to be responsible. Second, and perhaps more important, Damascus hopes to end its international isolation. As Foreign Minister Walid Muallem told the state news agency after preliminary meetings in Riyadh on March 25, "There is full Arab consensus on the refusal of the American position" regarding sanctions against the Asad regime.

Lebanon: A tale of two governments. Lebanon brings its own special set of issues to the summit. Unable to agree on personnel or positions, as happened last year, two Lebanese delegations will attend this summit: one led by pro-Western Prime Minister Siniora, the other by Syrian-allied President Emile Lahoud. According to a March 26 *al-Hayat* report, Lebanon will push for several largely compromise points at the summit, including compensation from Israel for the summer war, a UN role in adjudicating the Shebaa Farms dispute, and assurance of a Palestinian departure from Lebanon and a "right of return to their homes" in Israel. Lebanon will also raise other controversial domestic issues, such as the international tribunal on the Hariri assassination and Lebanese relations with Syria, albeit in a more generic way. In a nod to Hizballah, the Lebanese government is also asking the Arab League to publicly advocate a differentiation between "terrorism and legitimate resistance."

Palestinians. While Fatah and Hamas have their own separate interests, the Palestinians are entering the summit with a new national unity government and a unified position. The Palestinian agenda is limited and focused on money. The PA seeks Arab support to end the economic blockade on the Hamas-led government, as well as direct budgetary support. Based on statements emanating from Riyadh, it appears that the Arab League may in fact move to end the Palestinians' isolation. Several Arab states are also likely to renew their pledges to fund the PA, but the actual delivery of these pledges has long been a question mark.

Iraq. The positions advocated by the Iraqi delegation for adoption by the Arab Summit are largely noncontroversial. Among other elements, the platform includes support for the territorial integrity of Iraq and its "Arab and Islamic identity" -- a phrase that is both a slight to Kurds and a brushback for Iran -- as well as a call for a national reconciliation meeting to be held as soon as possible. Baghdad is also seeking Arab support for the following: a review of the de-Baathification law to "take away the rationale for political revenge"; the abolition of militias; and an equitable distribution of oil wealth in Iraq. The Iraqis may also be looking to their Gulf neighbors to finally fulfill their 2003 debt-relief commitments. But most important, Baghdad will be pressing for an end to external intervention in Iraq.

Conclusion

Given the summit agenda, there is a lot at stake for Washington. The administration is making a push to reenergize the moribund Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and has adopted the Arab Peace Initiative as a platform for diplomacy. Whether the Arab initiative eventually plays this kind of positive role is largely contingent on what happens at the Arab Summit. At the same time, it is all but certain that the summit

consensus will be to end the PA's financial isolation -- a step that could undermine continued European Union support for this U.S.-led policy.

And then there is Syria. To date, Saudi Arabia -- one of the leading proponents of Syrian isolation -- has rejected Syrian overtures for a rapprochement. There are even rumors that Riyadh and Tehran may be mediating a solution to the Lebanon crisis that leaves Damascus vulnerable to international sanctions. But Washington's diplomatic engagement with Damascus this month -- the first in nearly two years -- may be taken as a signal in the region that U.S. policy toward Syria is shifting. Sensing this, Arab states may be more conciliatory toward Damascus at this week's summit, undermining the already-tenuous international consensus on Syria.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at The Washington Institute. Simon Henderson is the Institute's Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program.

Copyright 2007 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy