

## Speech by Syrian Vice-President Al-Shar' Evokes Angry Responses in Saudi Arabia

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Speech by Syrian Vice-President Al-Shar' Evokes Angry Responses in Saudi Arabia Editor of Saudi Daily: 'Saudi Arabia May Take Steps to Change the Course of Syria's Future'

In a December 11, 2007 speech at the Syrian National Coalition Front conference, Syrian Vice President Farouq Al-Shar' stated that Syria's supporters in Lebanon were in a better position today than they had been when Syrian forces were in Lebanon - since they now constituted a "real force on the ground." Al-Shar' also expressed satisfaction that Syria's participation in the Annapolis conference had thwarted attempts to "divide the Arabs into moderates and extremists." He added that the Saudi royal family was opposed to the partition of Iraq because this might lead to the partition of the entire region - and Saudi Arabia might thereby lose control of its oil wells.

The speech evoked angry responses in the Arab world, especially in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. The March 14 Forces in Lebanon said that it confirmed their claims about Syria's extensive interference in Lebanon. The Kuwaiti daily Al-Siyassa, known for its anti-Syrian leanings, reported that in light of the speech, several Arab countries - most prominently Saudi Arabia - were thinking of transferring the March 2008 Arab League summit from Damascus to Cairo, or of boycotting it by sending low-level representatives. [1]

The remark about the Saudi opposition to the partition of Iraq likewise evoked irate reactions in the Saudi press, especially in light of the bitterness still felt over a previous speech by Al-Shar', on August 14, 2007, in which he stated that Saudi Arabia was "almost completely paralyzed [and unable to fulfill] this important role [in the Gulf]." [2] Particularly harsh statements came from the editor of the Saudi daily Al-Watan, Jamal Khashoggi, who implied that Saudi Arabia might take steps to "accelerate the wheels of history" and hasten the collapse of the Syrian regime. Following are excerpts from the Al-Shar's speech and from the responses to it. [3]

Al-Shar': "Syria Will Not Renew its Military or Political [Presence] in Lebanon, Since... Our Situation is Now Better [Than It Was Before]"

On the issue of Lebanon, Al-Shar' said: "Relations between Syria and Lebanon are exceptional and unique. Any Lebanese who is hostile towards Syria is hostile towards himself, and any Syrian who is hostile towards Lebanon is [likewise] hostile towards himself. It is really in [everyone's] interest that Syria-Lebanon relations will be at their best on the cultural, economic and security levels... Some [press] articles have claimed that Syria is trying to return its military [forces to Lebanon], since it is concerned about the [international] committee investigating [the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Al-Hariri]. I wish to stress an important point: Syria will not reestablish its military or political [presence] in Lebanon, since, even from a moral perspective, our situation is now better [than it was before]. We can now distinguish our [real] friends and brothers from the opportunists who pandered to Syria when [its forces] were present in Lebanon..."

"Syria's supporters in Lebanon are now stronger than ever, even stronger than they were when Syrian forces were in Lebanon... Our true and trusted allies constitute a real force on the ground, and nobody in Lebanon can defeat Syria - not even with the help of outside forces. This is a great achievement in itself... The dark episode of Syria's history in Lebanon has ended, and now [the anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon] can no longer shout and complain, or invest millions of dollars in winning elections and holding symposiums on television. They have failed, and so have those who stand behind them..."

"Lebanon constitutes Syria's flank, not only with regards to Israel, but in all matters pertaining to the security [of the two countries]. Even if we assume, for the sake of argument, that the Syrian-Israeli-Lebanese issue were to be resolved, we would [still] need good relations with Lebanon and vice versa... In the past, we were harshly [criticized] but forbore [from responding], and now everyone is asking us to intervene and pressure our allies, who have positions of their own... [The March 14 Forces] put forth Michel Sleiman [as presidential candidate] - a good man who has Syria's support. But [the Lebanese opposition] is complaining that his nomination was a [political] trick. Having performed this trick, [the March 14 Forces] are refusing to consider a nationally agreed-upon [candidate] for prime minister or [granting the opposition] more than 30% [of parliamentary seats]..."

"The resolution of this crisis should be Lebanese - not Syrian, Iranian, American or French. Today, 80% to 90% of the solution is in Lebanese hands, while only 10%-20% is in the hands of others."

"Our Participation in the Annapolis Conference Thwarted [the Attempts] to Divide the Arabs into 'Moderates' and

## 'Extremists'

On the Annapolis conference, Al-Shar' commented: "The mountain brought forth a molehill. Fifty countries from all over the world were mobilized [to attend this conference], but nothing came of it... We arrived [at Annapolis] with no illusions, but Syria did have an important achievement. By attending [the conference], it thwarted [the attempts] to divide the Arabs into 'moderates' and 'extremists.' There was an attempt to put Syria, Hizbullah, Hamas, and Iran under siege, and the result was supposed to be a great victory for the 'moderate' Arabs and for the neoconservatives in the U.S. Syria's presence at the conference was very important, [because] you all saw how the media broke down and the wind changed. The idea of 'moderate' versus 'extremist' Arabs collapsed. Moreover, we are planning to convene an Arab conference whose main goal is to mend inter-Arab [relations]..."

"We in Syria welcome everyone - except for Israel, which must first return the [occupied] land and [restore] the rights [that it is withholding], and [only] then will we open our doors to it. But we welcome any Arab who wishes to come to Syria, and will not close the door to him. More than that: If [U.S. President George W.] Bush wishes to talk with us about the Baker-Hamilton report, [and] if he wishes to be a hero of peace and to recognize the rights of Syria, of its people and of [all] the Arabs - that will not be a problem. On the contrary - we would welcome such a move, and we would find common ground with the American administration. But we will never accept American hegemony or submit to [domination by] anyone."

## "Partition of Iraq Means War"

"I believe that the statement by [Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad] in Turkey [namely that the partition of Iraq would lead to the explosion of the entire Middle East] [4] was very important, in that it dealt a blow to anyone wishing to partition Iraq. [Obviously,] it takes more than a single statement to prevent the partition of Iraq, but the statement did signal to others that anyone who wishes to do so will have to bear the grave consequences. Partitioning [Iraq] means war. Three countries - Syria, Turkey and Iran - and even some [additional] Arab countries, most prominently Saudi Arabia - oppose the partition of Iraq, since it might lead to the partition of the entire region. If this happens, the Saudi royal family might lose control of the [Saudi] oil wells - and for Riyadh, this is a line that must not be crossed."

## "Jordan Fears the Establishment of an Alternative Palestinian State on Its Soil"

Referring to the recent visit to Damascus by Jordan's King 'Abdallah II, Al-Shar' said, "Jordan needed the visit, because of the water it gets from Syria, and because it fears the establishment of an alternative Palestinian state on its soil." Al-Shar' explained that Jordan sees its relations with Syria as a buffer against this possibility. He added that Jordan "is legitimately concerned that the Jewish character of the state of Israel [might become a recognized principle], since this would mean relinquishing the right of return, and [might lead to] the deportation of the Palestinians living in Israel to Jordan."

## Harsh Criticism of the Speech in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia

### March 14 Forces: Al-Hajj's Assassination Is a Direct Reflection of What Al-Shar' Said in His Speech

The March 14 Forces in Lebanon were highly critical of Al-Shar's speech. Lebanese Forces Executive Body Chairman Samir Geagea said: "The explicit statements by Farouq Al-Shar' regarding [Syria's] allies in Lebanon [confirm] our fears and [the scenario] about which we have repeatedly warned." [5] Lebanese MP 'Ammar Hourri, from the Sunni Al-Mustaqbal faction headed by Sa'd Al-Hariri, said: "The statements [by Al-Shar'] were completely clear to his allies [in the Lebanese opposition]." Hourri expressed his concern that "the assassination of [Lebanese military operations head Francois] Al-Hajj is only the first of many [favours] promised by Al-Shar' [to his supporters in Lebanon]." [6]

### Editor of Saudi Daily: The Syrian Regime Has Made Mistakes that are On a Par with Saddam Hussein's Invasion of Kuwait

The Saudi press also condemned Al-Shar's statements. In their editorials, some Saudi dailies stated that "Al-Shar' is the main [figure] creating complications in inter-Arab relations," [7] and that his statements "prove that the problem [plaguing] the Arab nation - and not only Lebanon - is people who are living within it and pretending to work for its benefit but who are [actually] more dangerous than its enemies." [8]

Editor of the Saudi daily Al-Watan Jamal Khashoggi wrote that Saudi Arabia might increase its pressure on the Syrian regime by tightening its relations with "influential circles" inside and outside Syria, in order to accelerate the change that must take place within the country:

"Are the Syrian homeland and people about to return to the Arab fold? There are clear indications that this may be so, [among them] the historical forces that are at work within [Syria], the climate of openness towards the world, the fall of totalitarian regimes, and the rise of a market economy - as well as the mistakes of the [Syrian] regime."

"Mistakes are never a good thing, but they are worse when they come at a bad time. The Syrian regime has made many such mistakes, some of them so severe that they are on a par with the sin of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Time has passed, and Saddam Hussein has paid [for this sin], despite his numerous maneuvers [in an attempt to avoid it]... Other mistakes [by the Syrian regime] have been less grave, but they come on top of [Syria's] greatest sin [namely, the Al-Hariri assassination], which should not be spoken about until the international tribunal [for the Al-Hariri assassination] completes its task. I am referring to the careless remarks by [Syrian] Vice-President Farouq Al-Shar' against the Saudi government and people - remarks that increase the isolation of his [already] isolated regime. But since history works in mysterious ways, [these statements] may be precisely the factor that tips the scales as far as the hesitant attitude towards Syria's future is concerned.

"The strongest force in the region [i.e. Saudi Arabia] is likely to increase its pressure [on the Syrian regime], and formulate a new policy of strengthening its mutual ties with the influential forces inside and outside Syria, thereby accelerating the wheels of history and [hastening] the crucial change that must take place [in Syria] - until it reaches its ultimate end.

"Farouq Al-Shar's statement of a few days ago, [namely] that the partition of Iraq may bring about the partition of the Saudi kingdom, are a provocation not only to the Saudi [state] but also to the Saudi citizen. Had some mercenary journalist written this in a paper of unknown affiliation, it would not have been a problem... But [it is a different matter] when this statement is made by a man with considerable experience as foreign minister, who is supposed to be wise and meticulous in protecting Syrian's foreign relations - especially [its relations] with the strongest and most influential country in the region, which is closely monitored by the Syrians for every signal regarding their country and possible changes within it.

"Such a man undoubtedly harms the interests of his regime; on the other hand, he may [ultimately] help tip the scales, and serve the interests of the Syrian homeland and people by accelerating the slow progress of history, in light of the circumstances and tensions currently prevailing in the region, which Syria and its security apparatuses can proudly count among their achievements - if their actions in Iraq and Lebanon can, in fact, be regarded as 'achievements.'

"Syria has been living under emergency [law] for several decades now - a situation that has gradually worsened and has alienated this Arab and Muslim [country] from its natural environment. Syria is no longer regarded as the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula and of the Arab [region], but has been forced to become part of the [Shi'ite] continuum.

"[My words] should not be taken as an objection to friendship between Syria and Iran. After all, Saudi Arabia itself maintains good relations with Iran, as well as economic and cultural openness towards [this country]. But Syria is flesh of our flesh, and we are flesh of its flesh, and nobody has the right to force a relationship upon it that is alien to its natural historical, national, and religious [identity].

"Let us be frank - Syria's history and origins are not Persian, and it is not Shi'ite in its [religious identity]... It is a Sunni [country]: Its history is interwoven with our own, and the clans [that inhabit it] are related to those living in Saudi Arabia. Syria is the land of Salah Al-Din and Ibn Taymiyya, [9] and its future therefore lies with us - the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, and Egypt." [10]

[1] Al-Siyassa (Kuwait), December 23, 2007. [2] On the Syrian vice-president's August 14, 2007 speech, see MEMRI Special Dispatch No. 1687 "Syrian Vice-President in Speech Marking Syria's 'Journalists Day,'" August 17, 2007, <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP168707>.

[3] The Syrian government press did not publish the speech in full. Excerpts were published by the Syrian daily Al-Watan (December 12, 2007), the Lebanese daily Al-Nahar (December 12, 2007), and the London dailies Al-Sharq Al-Awsat (December 13, 2007) and Al-Quds Al-Arabi (December 17, 2007).

[4] Al-Akhbar (Lebanon), October 20, 2007.

[5] Al-Sharq Al-Awsat (London), December 13, 2007.

[6] 'Okaz (Saudi Arabia), December 16, 2007.

[7] Al-Watan (Saudi Arabia), December 16, 2007.

[8] 'Okaz (Saudi Arabia), December 16, 2007.

[9] Salah Al-Din Al-Ayyoubi (1138-1193) is the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt and Syria; Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) was a prominent Sunni Islamic scholar who lived in Harran, today a region in Turkey near the Syrian border.

[10] Al-Watan (Saudi Arabia), December 16, 2007.