

PREVIEW: Egypt and Saudi unite against Syria ahead of Arab summit

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Riyadh - Egyptian and Saudi leaders meet Sunday to coordinate their position on the next Arab summit amid strained ties with its Syrian host over Lebanon's political standoff and fears that the summit is doomed to failure. In their meeting, Egypt's President Hosny Mubarak and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia are expected to make a long-awaited crucial decision on the Damascus summit scheduled for March.

By deciding their level of participation in the summit, both regional powers, are setting the tone for many Arab countries, which are likely to follow suit.

Ahead of his visit to Riyadh, Mubarak stressed the importance of his alliance with the Saudis.

"Saudi-Egyptian ties are the mainstay of pan-Arab cooperation," Mubarak told Saudi al-Riyadh newspaper.

Lebanon's political ordeal is not only polarizing its own rival blocs, but also major Arab rivals.

The standoff stems from intractable disagreements between the majority coalition government and the Hezbollah-led opposition over their representation in a proposed unity cabinet and the ensuing stalemate in electing a president.

In turn, Riyadh and Cairo with their backing of the Lebanese majority government seem to have intractable disagreements with Syria, which backs the opposition.

Mubarak and Abdullah will reaffirm their declared position that the election of a Lebanese president - a post that has been vacant since November - is a prerequisite to a successful Arab summit.

But diplomatic sources in Riyadh refused to say whether Mubarak and Abdullah would boycott the summit in response to Syria's perceived interference in Lebanon's domestic politics and hindering the election of a consensual president.

Syria has recently lashed at the Cairo-Riyadh axis and insisted that the summit is going ahead irrespective of their level of participation.

"Syria rejects political blackmail by some Arab and international circles to affect the upcoming 20th summit in March," Syria's former Information Minister, Mahdi Dakhllallah told Deutsche Presse-Agentur dpa.

"Not a single Arab summit has brought all Arab leaders together," Dakhllallah said.

"The summit will be held as scheduled but there is a problem with the level of representation. It is certain that many leaders will attend," he added.

Summits are often marred by differences between Arab countries. Libya boycotted the Riyadh summit in 2007 while the 2005 summit, which was to be hosted by Tunisia and eventually held in Cairo, was marred by differences over democratization and ties with Israel.

DPA

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Saudi-Syria crisis over Lebanon 'threatens Arab summit'

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Lebanon's political crisis has damaged relations between Syria and Saudi Arabia, putting at risk next month's Arab summit in Damascus, Arab officials in Riyadh warned on Thursday.

"There is a crisis in ties with the Syrian government, with Lebanon the main reason," a Saudi official told AFP, asking not to be named.

"Damascus has not joined in efforts, including the Arab initiative, to elect a consensus president" in Lebanon, which has been left without a head of state since November amid deadlock between pro- and anti-Syrian camps, he said.

The Arab League plan calls for the election of army chief General Michel Sleiman as consensus president, followed by the formation of a national unity government in which no single party has veto power, and a new electoral law.

Despite agreement on Sleiman, the League has failed to nail down an accord on power-sharing in a new government between the Western- and Saudi-backed parliamentary majority and the opposition, supported by Damascus and Tehran.

"I call on all those with influence to help with the success of the Arab initiative," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said on Wednesday from Buenos Aires, in an indirect reference to Damascus.

He warned that Lebanon was "on the verge of civil war."

A member of Saudi Arabia's appointed consultative council, Mohammed al-Zulfa, recalled that the 2005 assassination of Lebanon's former premier Rafiq Hariri, who also held Saudi nationality, had affected ties with Damascus.

Syria has repeatedly fought off charges that it was behind the killing.

"The situation is worsening, as the kingdom believes the Syrian government is blocking efforts to settle the Lebanese crisis, especially with the Arab plan which had passed... with Syria's accord," he said.

Zulfa explained that Saudi Arabia was "upset at Iran's growing influence in Lebanon and the region at the expense of Arab interests, with Syria's help."

Behind the scenes of the political crisis in Lebanon lurks the international tribunal being set up to establish the truth behind the Hariri murder, added Saudi academic Khalid al-Dakhil.

"Damascus defines its relations with other countries on the basis of their attitude towards the tribunal. And because Riyadh favours setting up the trial the Syrian regime sees this as an unfriendly stance, even hostile."

An Arab diplomat said Syria was "accusing Saudi Arabia of trying to internationalise the Lebanese crisis" by supporting the Hariri tribunal which Syria fears could pin the blame on Lebanon's eastern neighbour.

Damascus believes Prince Saud's recent tour of several Western capitals, including Washington and Paris, was aimed at speeding up the establishment of the tribunal, said the diplomat posted in Riyadh.

Oil-rich Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have informed the Beirut government they will soon pay their contributions towards financing the tribunal, according to a senior Lebanese official.

Ahead of the March 29-30 summit in Damascus, Saudi Arabia has not even received an invitation from Syria even although the Gulf state currently holds its rotating presidency.

Zulfa said the kingdom was unlikely to take part at a high level unless Syria changes its stand on Lebanon, where it was the key powerbroker before the Hariri murder led to a Syrian military pullout after a three-decade deployment.

"It's possible the summit will not take place at all or only before a handful of heads of state," said Dakhil.

The Saudi academic said Lebanon could be left without a president for a long time yet "unless Syria secures an arrangement on the international tribunal... its biggest worry."

But the Arab diplomat ruled out a Saudi compromise on the Hariri probe, leaving little scope for healing the rift between Damascus and Riyadh.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said earlier this month that he hoped the Lebanon deadlock would be resolved by the time his country hosts the summit.

"Syria supports the Arab initiative as an overall plan which would be implemented by consensus between the Lebanese," he said.