

# Syria: After the Failed Summit

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## Summary

The Syrian-hosted Arab League summit that ended March 30 was a failure by any measure. In light of this failure, Damascus is working to combat its regional isolation. Most important to Syria will be getting regional Arab powers to take seriously the Syrian role in Lebanon. In its desperation, Damascus could turn on the heat in Lebanon, though ultimately this could backfire.

## Analysis

No matter how Syria tries to spin it, the March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus was a failure. Twelve of the Arab League's 22 heads of state — including the U.S.-allied countries of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon — failed to make an appearance, and the delegates that did show up were mired in a host of largely insignificant spats over the wording of the summit's final statement.

Syria — which cares a great deal about its position in the Arab world — has been dealt the worst possible outcome with this summit. It is now attempting to cope with its ever-apparent regional isolation.

Damascus's biggest worry is how to get the major Arab powers of the region to take seriously Syria's hegemonic role in Lebanon, where Syrian geopolitical interests are rooted. Despite the waves of intimidation tactics and diplomatic maneuvers employed by the Syrians regarding Lebanon, the U.S.-backed regimes in Beirut, Riyadh, Cairo — and to a lesser extent Amman — are refusing to yield to Syrian demands for a new Lebanese president amenable to Syrian interests, safeguards for Hezbollah and immunity for the Syrian government from an international tribunal on the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

Syrian President Bashar al Assad has made some headway on the tribunal issue; the U.N. team investigating the assassination recently praised Syria for its cooperation and circumvented U.S. pressure to directly implicate the Syrian government by vaguely blaming the assassination on a "criminal network." But he is still experiencing some indigestion in dealing with rifts that have erupted within the government involving Syrian military intelligence chief Asef Shawkat and the recent assassination of top Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyah in Damascus.

With Syria backed into such a tight corner, it becomes all the more critical to consider Damascus's moves in the wake of this summit. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and Stratfor sources have long reported that Syria will step up its game in Lebanon if the summit were to fail. The Syrian recipe for an uptick in chaos in Lebanon would involve a resumption of assassinations targeting additional anti-Syrian Cabinet members to bring about the collapse of the Western-backed government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. It also would involve instigating clashes between Islamist militant groups based out of Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps to absorb the Lebanese military's attention. Finally, it could involve sending jihadists transiting Syria toward the Iraqi border in a signal to the United States that Syria cannot be entirely ignored in negotiations over Iraq.

But major complications are attached to this Syrian strategy. For one thing, Syria will have a hard time relying on its militant proxy Hezbollah for any bold actions it wants to take in Lebanon. Not only is there a great deal of distrust brewing between the Hezbollah leadership and Syria over the Mughniyah assassination, Hezbollah is taking an extremely cautious approach these days in planning any militant activity. The Shiite militant group and its Iranian patrons are well aware that Israel is building the case for another military confrontation in Lebanon. Though Hezbollah has been busy making preparations for another war, the group's leaders know they will have a hard time claiming victory in a renewed conflict that could potentially undermine their credibility in the eyes of their southern Shiite support base — which would be on the receiving end of Israeli firepower.

Second, there is no guarantee that a more aggressive Syrian approach in Lebanon would result in a capitulation by the Siniora government to Syrian demands, particularly with the United States, France and the Western-backed Arab governments leaning heavily on the Siniora Cabinet to stand strong in spite of the country's faltering economy caused by the political crisis. A revitalized Syrian intimidation campaign could very well backfire and harden opposition to Syria's desired role in Lebanon, but with nowhere else to turn, these age-old tactics may be all that Damascus has to turn to.

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