

Arab leaders 'clear the air' in Riyadh

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Analysis: 'Mini-summit' unlikely to produce strategic realignment

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Associated Press , THE JERUSALEM POST

Saudi Arabia hosted the leaders of Egypt and Syria on Wednesday, in an effort to persuade Damascus to move away from Iran and instead work with US-allied Arab countries to blunt Teheran's influence.

Riyadh had hoped the one-day mini-Arab summit would help improve the frayed relations with Syria ahead of a larger Arab summit in Qatar later this month.

The leaders discussed a number of issues in the Arab arena in addition to "clearing the air" and achieving reconciliation to unite Arab ranks, according to Saudi sources quoted in Arab press reports on Wednesday.

The leader of another US ally, Kuwait, also attended the Saudi gathering, Kuwait's news agency reported.

Saudi King Abdullah also held a bilateral meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Riyadh on Wednesday, according to the Saudi News Agency.

The leaders discussed a number of topics of mutual interest, including "the prospects of cooperation between the two countries and ways of strengthening them in various fields," a Saudi source told the agency.

Assad's visit to Riyadh, which was prompted by an invitation from Abdullah, was the first official visit in more than three years.

Syria has been bitterly feuding with Egypt and Saudi Arabia over several political issues - especially its close alliance with Iran and with Palestinian and Lebanese terrorist groups.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Syria deteriorated following the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, a Saudi citizen, in February 2005.

Relations soured even more after Assad, following the Second Lebanon War, described leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan as "half-men" for their failure to act to stop the IDF.

Arab divisions were also brought to the fore during Israel's recent three-week military operation in Gaza against Hamas, which directly pitted those who sided with the Islamist movement, such as Syria, Iran and Qatar, against Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Ahead of Wednesday's mini-summit, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak cast doubt whether the leaders would come to any agreement. Egypt has repeatedly accused Iran, which along with Syria backs Hamas, of trying to thwart Cairo's mediation efforts between rival Palestinian factions.

Egypt's foreign minister also accused Teheran of trying to impose its control in the region. Ahmed Aboul Gheit told Egyptian state television on Tuesday that "Iran is manipulating Arab states and entities to increase its influence."

After Wednesday's summit ended, the official Saudi SPA news agency said the participants agreed it "was a start of a new phase in relations in which the four nations will endeavor to serve Arab interests through cooperation" and strive for a "unified approach to Arab policies when confronting issues, especially the Palestinian question."

The statement also said the meeting reflected the four leaders' efforts to "clear the air" and follow Abdullah's call to "leave past difference behind." It did not mention Iran.

Wednesday's meeting in Riyadh is seen as the continuation of reconciliation efforts launched by Abdullah at the Kuwaiti economic summit in January following the Gaza conflict.

The Saudi king has made limiting Iranian influence a top priority, recently urging Arab leaders to unite to curb Teheran's ambitions. Last week, Morocco severed ties with Iran, charging "intolerable interference" and trying to spread Shi'ite Islam in the Sunni Arab country.

Al-Jazeera cited anonymous sources on Wednesday that said Qatar was not invited to the four-way summit in Riyadh due to Egyptian reservations over its attendance.

Brenda Gazzar contributed to this report.

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 jonathan spyer , THE JERUSALEM POST

In a busy week for Arab diplomacy, Saudi King Abdullah bin Aziz met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in Riyadh on Wednesday. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is also due in the Saudi capital, where he too will meet with the Saudi monarch.

According to the Saudi media, a "mini-summit" bringing together Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Kuwait and Qatar is scheduled to take place in Riyadh this week.

All these meetings are being held in preparation for an Arab League summit, scheduled to take place in the Qatari capital, Doha, on March 30. Their purpose is to try to mend deep rifts which have opened up in the Arab world between states aligned with the US - such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia - and those Arab countries which have chosen to align themselves with Iran. Syria and increasingly Qatar are numbered in the latter camp.

It is unlikely that the current flurry of diplomacy will lead to a major strategic re-alignment in the region. There are good reasons to suspect that the Saudis themselves are aware of this, and have only modest ambitions regarding the series of maneuvers now under way.

Fear of Iran underlies the Saudi attempt to bring the Arab states together. The Saudis are acutely aware of the dangers posed by Iranian attempts to build regional influence through subversion in various flash-points across the Middle East - all backed up by the looming threat of Teheran's nuclear program.

At a meeting of Arab foreign ministers last week, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal called on the Arab states to reach agreement on facing the "Iranian challenge."

He referred specifically to the nuclear issue, the issue of Gulf security, and Iranian interference in the Palestinian arena, in Iraq and in Lebanon.

The Saudis are concerned at the possibility of a victory for the Hizbullah-led alignment in upcoming Lebanese elections in June. Saad Hariri, leader of the pro-western March 14 coalition, has close ties with Riyadh.

Saudi Arabia is also aware that the Iranians are trying to take "ownership" of the Palestinian issue - which remains the central cause in the eyes of the Arab masses. If the Iranian-supported Hamas continues to rise in prominence and power among the Palestinians - this will represent a major achievement in building the legitimacy which the non-Arab, non-Sunni Iranians need in establishing themselves as an alternative pole of power in the Middle East.

The vulnerability of the Gulf states - with their weak structures and large Shia populations - to Iranian subversion is also serving to concentrate the Saudi mind. The passing of Iraq to Shia domination completes the worrying regional picture.

So the Saudis are trying to rally the Arab world to unite against Iran.

Syria is the main Arab ally of Teheran. Syrian support for Hizbullah and possible involvement in the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri have set Damascus at loggerheads with the Saudis over the last half-decade.

Assad's description of Arab leaders as "half-men" for their refusal to back Hizbullah in the 2006 war also did not help matters. Riyadh has a clear interest in beginning rapprochement - through clenched teeth.

As for Qatar - there is a certain impatient contempt in Riyadh and Cairo at the Qataris' attempts to make themselves spokesmen for regional radicalism.

Doha's belated discovery of the language of Arab defiance is not taken entirely seriously - particularly because Qatar makes sure to maintain its close relations with the US, while at the same time indulging in nationalist and Islamic rhetoric.

The Saudis' problem is that regional re-alignments do not usually come from well-organized conferences. Rather, they take place after significant shifts in power relations between rival blocs. And since no one can discern any recent setback of cardinal significance to Iranian ambitions on any major front, it is difficult to see why Teheran's allies should now begin to question their choice of patron.

The Saudi intention to try to loosen the Syrian alliance with Iran gibes well with the current active US approach to the Syrians. This, indeed, may be the real explanation for the present round of meetings.

Two senior US diplomats, Jeffrey Feltman and Dan Schapiro, just completed the highest level visit of American officials to Damascus since 2005. Feltman expressed his view that Syria can play "an important and constructive role in the region" following his talks with Syrian officials.

One source close to the Saudi court said that the Saudis are largely going through the motions at present with regard to Syria - out of a desire to fit in with current US thinking as to what needs to be done.

Other observers speak of the meetings in Riyadh as an effort to reduce the damage of the split among the Arab states in the build-up to the Doha summit, rather than to begin to really resolve it.

The bottom line is that the spread of Iranian power in the region is set to continue until it confronts a stronger counter-force. That counter-force will not be the Saudis, nor is the confrontation likely to take place in an air-conditioned Riyadh conference room.

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