

Assad, Abdullah Agree to 'Remove Obstacles' to Closer Ties, Decision Could End Political Stalemate

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Saudi King Abdullah and Syria President Bashar al-Assad agreed on Wednesday to "remove the obstacles" to closer ties between the two powerhouses long at odds, Syrian state news agency SANA reported.

The decision could contribute to helping stabilize Iraq, which borders both countries, and to ending a political stalemate in Lebanon, where Riyadh and Damascus have great influence and have been on opposite sides of the fence.

The daily As-Safir on Thursday quoted sources close to President Michel Suleiman as saying that Suleiman welcomes the Syrian-Saudi rapprochement "which could be in the interest of Lebanon and facilitate the formation of a productive government."

King Abdullah arrived in Syria earlier for a two-day visit, his first since acceding to the throne in 2005.

He was welcomed at the airport by Assad. The two men then went into talks, which had been expected to cover such issues as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and whom to back to keep Iraq stable as U.S. troops withdraw.

The two leaders underlined their "commitment to pursue coordination and consultations at all levels on matters that interest both peoples," SANA said, and want to "remove the obstacles that have hindered their relations."

They called for the "joining of Arab, Islamic and international efforts to lift the (Israeli) embargo imposed on the Palestinians and put an end to the practices of Israeli occupation forces against the rights of the Palestinian people and sacred sites of Islam."

Assad political advisor Bouassaina Shaaban described the summit as "constructive, positive and friendly."

Hady Amr, of the Brookings Doha Center thinktank, said "a trip by the king of Saudi Arabia to Syria is very significant, certainly for inter-Arab relations."

Ties between Damascus and Riyadh deteriorated in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq over Saudi support for the United States.

Relations soured further after the assassination in 2005 of ex-Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri.

Hariri, who also held Saudi nationality, was close to the monarchy in the oil-rich Gulf state and had extensive business interests in the kingdom.

There were widespread suspicions that Syria was behind the killing, something Damascus has consistently denied.

The son of the slain premier, himself chosen to form a new government after winning elections in June, has so far failed because of continuing differences with the Syrian- and Iranian-backed opposition, led by Hizbullah.

But there has been widespread speculation in Lebanon that Abdullah's visit could spell a breakthrough on that front.

Riyadh has also been at odds with Damascus over its warm relations with Saudi Arabia's rival Iran and its support for Hizbullah.

In that vein, Shaaban noted that the new Saudi-Syrian cooperation would be "added to those between Syria and its two friends, Turkey and Iran."

In early July, Riyadh named a new ambassador to Syria after leaving the post vacant for a year, and a visit by Abdullah has been in the works since that time, Saudi officials say.

The rapprochement comes at the same time as a cautious warming takes place between Damascus and Saudi ally Washington under President Barack Obama.

"It's not surprising that this meeting is taking place during the Obama administration," said Amr. "The U.S. wants to bring Syria more into the fold."

Assad and Abdullah have met several times in regional forums since Abdullah became king, although there have been no official visits until now.

Analysts say ties began to improve at an Arab summit in Kuwait in January, when Abdullah pushed hard to gain support from Assad and other Arab leaders for the revival of the Arab Peace Initiative -- a two-country solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- which the Saudis first launched in 2002.

Mansour al-Mansour, head of the Centre for Strategic Studies in Riyadh, said: "Good relations" between Saudi Arabia and Syria "will help ease other tensions within the Arab world."

An indication that Syria has changed was this year's Lebanese election, he said. "They didn't interfere in the election. I think that is a good indicator Syria wants a good relationship with Arabs."(AFP-Naharnet)

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