



Triangle Alliance Troubles

RECENT VISITS TO SAUDI ARABIA by Syria's President Bashar al-Asad sparked hope among Arab commentators and Saudi officials that Riyadh's year-long promotion of inter-Arab reconciliation and cohesion was about to be crowned with success. However, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak chose not to join Asad and Saudi King Abdullah at their last meeting, and the renewal of the Saudi-Egyptian-Syrian triangle alliance, the central pillar of past episodes of successful joint Arab action, remained out of reach.



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By now, the fragmentation of the Arab state system is axiomatic. Individual states maneuver as best they can within the context of myriad and intertwined pressures emanating simultaneously from domestic, regional and global environments. Still, maneuvering requires alliance-building.

Syria has excelled in this: Alongside its 30-year alliance with the Iranian Islamic Republic, Damascus has now developed much warmer relations with its powerful, and formerly hostile Turkish neighbor. Improved relations with Saudi Arabia, after nearly five years of Saudi animosity, which was triggered by the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri by Syrian agents and extending to include everything connected to the Iranian 'file,' is also part of the Syrian agenda.

To that end, and with Lebanon once again safely in Syria's "pocket," Asad signaled to Abdullah that he stood with Saudi Arabia in support of the Yemeni government in the face of the Houthi rebellion: Since 2004, Yemen has been intermittently fighting a Zaydi (Shia) rebellion based in Saada province in the north of the country, adjacent to the Saudi border. Saudi Arabia views this as another attempt by Iran to project its power and influence in the region through a restless Zaydi-Shi'ite minority. Presumably, Asad also expressed Syria's assent to Saudi Arabia's continued advocacy of the 2002 Arab peace initiative, and perhaps hinted that it would do its part to promote intra-Palestinian reconciliation. By contrast, improving Syria's frosty relations with Egypt appears not to be a high priority for Asad.

According to the Lebanese commentator Rajeh el-Khoury, Saudi Arabia views the continued absence of Arab cooperation and solidarity as leaving the entire Arab region as an arena "first for Israeli aggression, second, for Iranian intervention, and third for Turkish "imperial" ambitions. While the Saudis are genuinely angry with Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, settlement policies and actions in Jerusalem, and may view Turkey's return to the Middle East as a regional power with suspicion, it is Iran's continued power projection which is uppermost in their mind. Tehran's ever-progressing nuclear program and parrying of international pressures, its expansion of influence among Iraqi Shi'ites in post-Saddam Iraq, support for Hizballah and Hamas, tight alliance with Syria and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's popularity in the Arab street, cause Saudi leaders to lose sleep at night.

But the addition of Iranian meddling in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's vulnerable backyard, has added new urgency to the situation. Iranian char-

acterizations of Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Salih as "Little Saddam" only further confirm the Saudi conviction that Iran's hand is deep in the northern Yemeni mountains near the Saudi border. Perhaps the only thing worse would be an Iranian-fomented rebellion among Saudi Arabia's own Shi'ite minority in the country's oil-rich Eastern Province. In light of this threatening environment, Riyadh, like Damascus, views active diplomacy and regional alliance-building as crucial to its survival. To that end, it seeks to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran,

and strengthen its ties with Turkey as well (hence it's hosting this past week of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan).

Egypt broadly shares Saudi Arabia's concerns over Iran, and has not forgotten Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah's boast of having activated Hizballah cells in Egypt. Its ruling elites are extremely angry over charges by opponents at home and on Arab satellite television that Egypt is serving Israeli interests and neglecting its obligations to the Palestinians by building a new barrier between Egypt and Gaza. According to thoughtful analysts like Abdel Moneim Said Aly, the president of Egypt's Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, these irresponsible attacks are designed to goad Egypt into renewed conflict with Israel, and thus plunge Egypt back into a whirlwind of regional wars after nearly four decades of peace.

Official Cairo is also extremely frustrated with Hamas's recalcitrance over the prisoner exchange negotiations and intra-Palestinian reconciliation, which it blames on Damascus-based Khaled Mashaal and his Syrian and Iranian patrons. The Saudis are similarly unhappy with Mashaal over his Iranian ties

The Iranian specter has another worrisome angle in Cairo and Riyadh: the Egyptian and Saudi governing elites are apprehensive over the possibility of a grand bargain between the Western powers (their main patrons) and Iran, which would essentially constitute an acknowledgment of Iran's preeminence in the region and thus be at their expense. This does not mean, however, that they favor a military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, which they fear will trigger a maelstrom of violence and instability throughout the region.

Notwithstanding their similar perspectives, Egypt is notoriously sensitive about playing second fiddle to Saudi diplomacy and, in any case, even tighter coordination between the two countries would not guarantee significant diplomatic gains. The upcoming March Arab summit conference, to be hosted by Libya's Muammar al-Qadhafi, will probably produce more diplomatic maneuverings and no little theatrics, but the regional balance of power remains unfavorable to Arab states, individually and collectively. For now, Egypt is focusing mainly on Washington, seeking to shape the Obama Administration's upcoming renewal of Arab-Israeli diplomacy.

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