

After Damascus

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If the official Arab order is to be worth writing about, it needs to take bold steps to address the realities, not the rhetoric, of present Arab problems and establish mechanisms to deal with them, writes **Hassan Nafaa**

I imagine the Arab people are asking themselves hundreds of hypothetical questions about developments preceding -- and during -- the Arab summit in Damascus in an attempt to form an idea of what will come next. Perhaps their first question is whether Syria would have been able to ensure the attendance of all Arab heads of state had it responded to the demand of some Arab governments to pressure its allies in Lebanon to elect a new president there before the summit. After some thought, they would probably have answered, "maybe, but not necessarily." After all, it was no secret that several Arab heads of state only decided to go to Damascus after ascertaining that certain others would not be there. Indeed, attendance registers over the long history of Arab summits suggests that presence or absence has less to do with dedication to duty than it does with taking jabs and settling scores. Also, there has never been a summit in which all heads of state have been present and accounted for.

People must also be wondering whether the summit would have accomplished more if the Lebanese crisis had been resolved in advance and if all Arab League members had been present, including Michel Suleiman as representative for Lebanon. Would not the summit then have been able to make some inroads towards solutions to the other crises in the Arab world, notably in Palestine, Sudan, Somalia and elsewhere? Again, people would probably have thought, "not necessarily, and most likely not." All these problems existed before the Lebanese presidential crisis flared up, and they still exist and will probably get worse if conditions in the Arab world continue as they are.

The decision by Arab governments to reduce their level of representation in Damascus was founded on two main premises. The first is that Syria has obstructed -- and continues to obstruct -- a resolution to the Lebanese crisis and, thus, should bear responsibility for this alone. The second is that since Syria's position on the Lebanese crisis is the shoal on which Arab cooperation and collective action founders, Damascus should bear responsibility for the failure of the summit. Nevertheless, I doubt very much that the Arab public is thoroughly convinced.

On the contrary, I bet that it would see other possibilities, including: first, casting the blame for the persistence of the Lebanese crisis on Syria is no more than the official Arab order's way of disguising its inability to stand up on behalf of the Palestinian and Iraqi people, to prevent the fragmentation of Sudan and to deter Ethiopia's violation of Somali sovereignty. It is also a handy pretext for backing out of a summit that this or that leader did not want to attend to begin with because he did not want to commit himself to an agenda for joint Arab action. Second, the decision to reduce the level of representation was intended to abort the summit before it began and should be seen in the context of a mounting campaign on the part of the "moderate axis" in the region to pressure Syria into cutting loose from its alliance with Iran.

Regardless of the arguments that might be cited for or against such hypotheses, the Arab people feel that Arab governments as a whole, and not just one party or axis, are no longer able to influence the course of events in the region and that this ability now resides almost totally in the hands of non-Arab parties, these being the US and Israel, on the one hand, and Iran on the other. Many also fear that these two sides are on a dangerous collision course out of which all Arab countries, and not just one party or axis, will end up paying a heavy price. Numerous reports and studies appearing in the press or published by prominent research centres see the likelihood of another war in the region in the next few months.

Many believe that Israel is seriously contemplating a new assault against Hizbullah, at whose hands Israel suffered a stunning setback in the summer of 2006. But as desperate as Israel is to recover the lost prestige of its deterrent power and rebuild the morale of its armed forces, it does not want to risk a repeat of that fiasco. Therefore, it is prodding the US into mounting a simultaneous strike against Iran, which Tel Aviv regards as its foremost enemy, not only because of the ostensible threat of its nuclear programme but also because of the political and military support Tehran has given to Hizbullah, enabling the Lebanese resistance movement to inflict two consecutive defeats on Israel in 2000 and 2006. At the same time, if Israel cannot propel the US into a war against Iran while the Bush administration is still in power it will probably have missed its last chance. It thus realises that it has only a small window of opportunity, consisting of no more than the next three or four months.

Meanwhile, the US's dilemma in Iraq appears to be deepening in light of recent events indicating that any improvement in the security situation following the troop "surge" is a mirage and that Iranian influence in the country is increasing. Again, because the current US administration has little time left to set the stage for serious negotiations with Iran over an honourable exit strategy from Iraq, and because this administration is probably not disposed to pay the price Iran would seek to begin with, it is growing more and more convinced that another war is the only way out of its predicament. Weakening Iran, it thinks, would weaken opposition to US policies in the region and pave the way for the imposition of Israel's conditions for a settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The US and Israel are aware that some Arab regimes, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have strong reasons of their own for being concerned over Iran's growing influence in the region. Riyadh fears that the fall of Iraq into Iran's grip -- especially after a US withdrawal -- would upset the current domestic balances of power in many Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. Cairo fears Iran's growing influence in the Levant, particularly in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Neither Riyadh nor Cairo sees it in its interests for Iran to become the leading regional power. Aware of these concerns, of course, the US and Israel are keen to turn them towards the pursuit of their plans to topple the regime in Tehran.

Another major aggravating factor is that Israel, the US and, hence, the Arab "moderates" have nothing to offer Syria and the militant resistance movements in Lebanon and Palestine that might lure them away from Iran. The reason for this is very simple: Israel is unwilling to pay the price -- the withdrawal to 1967 borders, the creation of an independent Palestinian state and the recognition of the Palestinian refugees' right to return -- necessary for peace and the US is unwilling to pressure Israel into paying that price. So, efforts on the part of Arab "moderates" to press Syria into pressuring its allies, Hizbullah and Hamas, make them appear to be doing favours for Israel free of charge, which the Arab public would naturally find perplexing and unacceptable. Fortunately, Syria realises how delicate the current situation is and has successfully dodged attempts to provoke it. This explains the conciliatory tone of the

"Damascus declaration" and summit resolutions, and the consequent sense of relief, in spite of the fact that everything remains exactly the same.

It is a great pity that the Arab people's hopes and anxieties for the summit have been reduced to the prayer that it would not erupt into a mudslinging match and the belief that the mere aversion of such an explosion would be sufficient to proclaim the summit's great success. Quite evidently, the Arab summit, which only a few years ago became a permanent Arab League institution, has prematurely aged, and this, I believe, is only the tip of the iceberg of the current sorry state of inter-Arab affairs. If inter-Arab cooperation is to make any tangible progress, three parallel mechanisms must be put in place, each governed by an agreed-upon set of clear and precise rules and regulations. The first is a dispute settlement mechanism. So far, all the many and strenuous efforts that have been expended towards the creation of an Arab Court of Justice have met with nothing but frustration. Without such an autonomous arbitrating body of professional judges whose authority is binding on Arab League members, collective Arab action will never take a qualitative leap forward.

There must secondly be a collective security council, under the umbrella of the Arab League and endowed with the powers and instruments to pre-empt or contain crises that, if left uncontrolled, could spiral into armed conflicts or regional wars. Naturally, an Arab security council and its powers and jurisdictions must be based on a collective vision of the sources of threat to Arab security and the means to confront them.

The third is an effective mechanism for the promotion of healthy economic and social integration, one of the primary tasks of which would be to remedy the problems of development and poverty in the Arab world. The Arab economic and social summit scheduled to be held in Kuwait at the outset of next year offers a real opportunity for some tangible progress on this front, all the more so in view of the Arab League's excellent choice of Mervat Al-Talawi as general coordinator for that summit. With Al-Talawi's considerable expertise in handling obstacles to Arab economic and social cooperation we can be assured that all the groundwork will have been well prepared.

As for that summit's work, it will focus on the three realms of cooperation in economic and social affairs. The first is aid, beneath which heading wealthy Arab nations are presumed to allocate a portion of their revenues to the assistance of poor Arab nations. Past experience in this realm has been riddled with shortcomings, not least of which is rampant corruption in both the allocating and recipient agencies. The second is joint inter-Arab economic projects, another area that has been far from as productive as hoped. The third realm is actual economic integration. Although the European model offers hope in this regard, the Kuwait summit should not be expected to produce an imitation of that model but rather to study it as a source of inspiration for the formulation of an Arab model that meets the actual needs of all its constituents.