

AN ARAB QUARTET?

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The growing assertiveness and influence of the (Shiite) Islamic Republic of Iran across the Near East and the Persian Gulf has fostered steadily rising dismay among its Sunni Arab neighbors. Iran's hand is widely seen as stirring the pot in Lebanon, Iraq and the intra-Palestinian arena. When combined with Tehran's accelerating nuclear program, calls for Israel's disappearance and high-profile Holocaust denial activities, Iran's behavior, as seen from Cairo, Riyadh, Amman and portions of Beirut, poses a threat to the stability of the region, and first and foremost to their own security and survival. In Washington, Jerusalem and London, there has been expressed interest in the establishment of an "Arab Quartet", consisting of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf principalities, which would complement, and coordinate with the work of the existing international Quartet (US, EU, Russia, UN) on Middle East issues.

Could such a grouping be effective? Their common interests are considerable: checking Iraq's descent into chaos and the concomitant rise of Shiite power there; supporting the Siniora government in Lebanon against the efforts to topple it by a Syrian-backed, Hizballah-led coalition; halting the growing anarchy in the Palestinian Authority areas by supporting some sort of national unity government; and reinvigorating the long-stalled Arab-Israeli peace process, ideally on the basis of the 2002 Beirut Arab summit resolutions. Progress on any or all

of these issues would help counter Iran's bid for regional hegemony.

But while their common interests seem to dictate the formation of a strong alliance, there are many obstacles to doing so. The political, economic and military capacities of each of the three non-Arab Middle Eastern states - Turkey, Iran, Israel - outweigh those of Egypt, the historic leader of the Arab world. Theoretically, the marriage of Saudi and Gulf Arab capital to Egypt's demographic, cultural and strategic weight could produce an equivalent power center, but when it has come to anything which might impinge on their sovereignty and mastery of their oil wealth, the Peninsula Arabs have always shied away from Egypt's embrace. In any case, the decline of Egypt's regional weight has been on ample display in recent years: Mubarak's American patron utterly disregarded his counsel to refrain from invading Iraq in 2003; exhaustive diplomatic efforts on the internal Palestinian and Israeli-Palestinian fronts produced negligible results; and the Arab League, headed by former Egyptian foreign minister Amr Moussa has proved to be an empty shell, most recently with Moussa's failed efforts to mediate the political crisis in Lebanon. Domestically, too, Egypt's situation is hardly bright: the question of succession looms increasingly large, the opposition Muslim Brotherhood has gained in strength, and the regime maintains its autocratic, heavy-handed

ways. The repeated abilities of al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups to strike at tourist sites in the Sinai region are an ongoing embarrassment.

Saudi-Egyptian cooperation on regional issues in the post-Nasser era was most effective when it included a third pillar: Syria. In October 1973, the Saudis underwrote the Egyptian-Syrian war against Israel; in 1976, the three countries struck an important, albeit temporary agreement on Lebanon and Arab-Israeli diplomacy; in 1990-91, Egypt and Syria provided crucial Arab legitimacy for the Saudis' decision to ask for American help to confront Saddam Husayn and evict his forces from Kuwait; the three countries then acted in concert with the US as it jump-started Arab-Israeli diplomacy with the Madrid summit conference. But throughout the last three decades, Syria's interests and policy choices also frequently clashed with one or both of the other two Arab "majors", making their cooperation sporadic at best. Neither was ever happy with Syria's domination of Lebanon, and occasionally sought to clip its wings there. Syria's vehement rejection of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty left a bad taste in Cairo, while almost concurrently, Syria's alliance with non-Arab Iran in the war against Arab Iraq during the 1980s conferred near-pariah status on Damascus in the Arab world.

Under Bashar Asad, the finesse displayed by his late father in negotiating regional diplomatic pitfalls and minefields disappeared, as Bashar unabashedly carved out a militant Arab nationalist position on most issues, while also deepening his relationship, and even dependence on Iran. Bashar's unequivocal support for Palestinian radical groups, his strident tone at Arab summit conferences, the apparent Syrian involvement in the murder of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri and Bashar's moral and material embrace of Hizballah have left Damascus barely on speaking terms with its Arab neighbors. Meanwhile, the chaos in Iraq looms large, and Syria's apparent unwillingness, or inability to prevent the movement of men and

supplies from its territory to Sunni insurgents in Iraq, continues to draw American fire (paradoxically, this support contradicts the concern in some Arab quarters that Syria is willingly becoming part of a dreaded "Shiite crescent" stretching from Tehran to Beirut).

Given Syria's oppositionist, minority stance among Arab states, it would seem that the first order of business for the prospective Quartet would be to wean Syria away from its alliance with Iran and bring its positions more into line with the rest, beginning with Lebanon. But from the beginning, Syria has viewed its alliance with the Islamic Republic as strategic, and appears to be increasingly dependent on it for aid and support, in Lebanon (Syria's front yard) and elsewhere. Tired of Bashar's antics, the Saudis have begun to entertain the notion of supporting regime change from within a disaffected portion of the Syrian elite. For the moment, however, the prospects of success appear low. At the same time, many Arab and Western pundits and politicians fear that destabilization in Syria will bring a radical (Sunni) Islamist regime to power, making their governments reluctant to confront Bashar's regime directly.

In any case, even at the best of times, Arab coalitions have been "loose," involving adversaries as much allies, with each state jealously guarding its prerogatives and seeking to maximize its room for independent action – hardly the right stuff for concerted strategic coordination. Current conditions do not seem auspicious for the establishment of an effective Arab Quartet. Sunni Arab regimes will thus have to muddle through as best they can in an increasingly problematic regional environment, taking incremental steps to ameliorate specific situations, while remaining heavily dependent on the international community to check Iran's ambitions and with limited leverage and influence on Western decision-makers.