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The Beirut Summit, July 2010

Compiled by

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[In late July 2010 King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia undertook a visit to a number of Arab countries. The hallmark of his visit was the summit meeting in Beirut on 30 July when he met President Michel Suleiman of Lebanon and President Bashar Assad of Syria. Reactions of the international media are reproduced here. **Editor, MEI Media Watch.**]

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Beirut, Editorial, 31 July 2010, Saturday

1. Calm offers Lebanon a chance to mature

In parsing the significance of the Friday's summit of Saudi King Abdullah, Syrian President Bashar Assad and Lebanon's leaders, it is crucial to grasp that this is not exclusively about Lebanon. The effort, led by Abdullah, represents part of a regional initiative indivisible from the push to revive direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations.

One should see Abdullah's work on Friday as another milestone on this path of his that includes the summit he backed in Kuwait in January 2009 to resuscitate the peace talks. What happened

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in Lebanon on Friday is also inextricably linked to the involvement of the Obama administration in the peace process, as well as the support expressed this week by the Arab League for Palestine to enter direct talks with Israel.

The summit brings home to us this major departure from previous approaches; hitching the Palestinian narrative to other issues percolating in the region is designed to create the international stability required for Palestinian-Israeli negotiations to move forward.

Of course, we must also note that this new approach might be short-lived, because a major variable in the equation – Obama’s attempt to defuse the Iranian nuclear file – remains up in the air, to put it mildly. It also depends on what Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu is willing to put on the table; to be sure, Mahmoud Abbas also faces difficult constraints ahead of any direct talks, and all of these unknowns might well stay unresolved until the November midterm elections in the US, which could also recalibrate the dynamic.

Despite increasingly belligerent rhetoric from Israel this year toward Lebanon, Friday’s summit also reduces the threat of any confrontation on that front. The presence of Abdullah and Assad establishes the diplomatic precedent that Saudi Arabia and Syria are going to cooperate to avert strife in Lebanon, which is certainly a welcome development. To be sure, fears still smoulder here about what Hezbollah will do if the Special Tribunal for Lebanon indicts Hezbollah members, and Prime Minister Saad Hariri has a most difficult task in managing the situation here until an indictment is handed down.

The coming period will require a great deal of self-control and calm from Lebanon’s leaders. Although they have allowed regional powers, in some sense, to direct the affairs of Lebanon, and while the summit set parameters for how top officials here should proceed, Friday’s milestone does not absolve this country’s leaders of their responsibility to take advantage of the stability handed to them. However long the calm might last, they need to use this space for the germination of a Lebanese state that could one day manage its own crises.

Source:

http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=17&article_id=117654#axzz0wxvQNdRi



Dubai, Editorial, 31 July 2010, Saturday

2. Defusing tension in Lebanon

The build up of tension in Lebanon is a major concern in the region. This is why Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz has embarked on a four-state regional peace mission.

The highlight of the trip is Lebanon where King Abdullah is leading a tripartite reconciliation meeting aimed to mend ties between Lebanon and Syria. It would, indeed, be a major achievement in case Syrian President Bashar Al Assad and Lebanese President Michel Suleiman are able to resolve existing differences. Since 2005, the two states have been at loggerheads over Beirut's allegations of Syria's involvement in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri.

The other important agenda for Lebanon is to defuse the escalating tension with Hezbollah.

Lebanon faces a very real danger of a breakout of conflict, both internally and with Israel. A very determined Hezbollah has already announced its decision to stand by all its members in case they are indicted for their complicity in the Hariri assassination. The verdict of Hariri's UN investigation is to be announced in the near future. In case of a ruling against Hezbollah members, the danger is of a break-up of the coalition government besides a new spurt of sectarian conflict.

At the same time, the heated exchange of words and counter-allegations between Israel and the Hezbollah leadership has escalated in recent months. Both sides seem prepared to go to war. Any fresh outbreak of conflict with Israel may conflagrate regionally and even involve states like Syria and Iran. Containing these tensions at this juncture is thus particularly important. While the Saudi leadership's initiative to exercise damage control is commendable, it is hoped that it bears desired results. The immense political and religious clout enjoyed by the Saudis not only in the Middle East but among the Muslim *ummah* can be brought in to influence Hezbollah to show restraint and follow a more prudent course of action. A third party like Israel may well exploit any wrong step taken for emotional reasons. It is, therefore, very important that any internal fissures are repaired lest they become too deep to contain. In addition, those charged must be allowed legal recourse to prove their innocence. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah has denied the charges stating that the court, at the behest of US and Israel, were levelling these to defame the militant group.

Besides, the Palestine issue has been the focus of talks held between King Abdullah and the political leadership of Egypt and Syria. Post Lebanon the Saudi King is also expected to visit Jordan. Given the high priority Arab leaders relegate to the Palestine issue, it is extremely important that inter-Arab differences are resolved. Besides, security and stability in the Middle East would require a more proactive involvement by all stakeholders. To date, the main reason why success has remained elusive is because of a lack of unity to work together as part of a

cohesive Arab strategy. It is hoped that the Saudi efforts are not wasted and the regional states are able to achieve a peaceful reset in their relations.

Source:

http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticleNew.asp?xfile=data/editorial/2010/July/editorial_July58.xml§ion=editorial



Dubai, Editorial, 4 August 2010, Wednesday

3. Another Mideast showdown?

Syrrian President Bashar Al Assad's warning about rising war prospects in the region has caused a stir and a half. Assad's words are particularly ominous for he has just returned from a visit to Lebanon with Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz.

The unprecedented visit was aimed at containing the rising tensions in Lebanon that are seen as threatening the outbreak of a sectarian conflict and war with Israel.

Over the past few months, Israel has been hurling accusations left, right and centre at Syria, Iran and Hezbollah. The problem is any deliberate provocation or even an accident, no matter how small, could trigger a conflict. Recently, the region saw a heated exchange between Damascus and Tel Aviv after Israel accused Syria of providing Hezbollah with Scud and other missiles to use against the Jewish state. Doubtless, the root cause of these tensions is the illegal annexation of Syrian territory by Israel in 1967. As Assad has pointed out, Syria will not compromise on the Golan Heights, illegally annexed in the 1980's by Israel after it was captured in the six-day war in 1967.

Damascus has also blamed Israel for the failure of indirect talks mediated by Turkey. It has often reiterated that an unwillingness to return all occupied territories by Israel is the chief impediment to resolving tensions in the region. A fact that is not going to change, no matter how Israel may wish that other states and people forego their lands. This is also a reason why Arab states have decided to resolve existing inter-Arab differences in order to work jointly to resolve the status quo.

The Lebanon reconciliation initiative by the Saudis was thus important. Not only was the right message delivered to Hezbollah but also to Beirut to refrain from emotional response in the event of an unfavourable ruling by the UN court in the Hariri case. There is an apprehension that some Hezbollah members may be indicted, thus sparking sectarian fighting within Lebanon. Besides,

the bigger apprehension is that a war with Israel at this juncture may cause the necessary diversion. While Hezbollah has denied this, it is also possible that Israel could spring a surprise on this front. Stakes are high and revenge for the past humiliation is reason enough to reignite the fire. That is why it is so important to resolve internal tensions lest these open the way for external interventions. And it may not be limited to Lebanon as Syria and Iran are also likely to be pulled in.

Territorial disputes between Syria and Israel therefore need to be resolved. So far, successive Israeli governments have refused to even negotiate with any pre-conditions. Tel Aviv simply refuses to give any schedule for withdrawal despite international recognition of the fact that it is illegal. The question is how far the West, especially United States, will keep aloof and not ask its ally to abide by international norms.

Source:

http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.asp?xfile=data/editorial/2010/August/editorial_August7.xml§ion=editorial&col=



Jeddah, Editorial, 30 July 2010, Friday

4. Lebanese summit

It does not take genius to know that the Middle East is the most fractured place on earth.

Palestinians are divided into two mutually hostile camps, Iraqis are still under occupation and remain at bloody odds with each other, the region is threatened by the possibility of another war over Iran's nuclear plans, there is simmering conflict in Yemen and terrorism continues to stalk the region. Arching above all and fuelling the region's instability is Israel's ever-tightening occupation of Palestinian lands and its blockage of the Palestinians' right to their own sovereign state. Meanwhile, across the Red Sea, in the North African half of the Arab world, the picture is just as grim in certain areas. Think Somalia, Darfur or Al-Qaeda's activities in the Maghreb.

The faint-hearted could be forgiven for deciding to give up on the Middle East and get on with their own lives. That is not the Saudi way. The country's location as home of the Two Holy Mosques and its great wealth have given it a unique status and influence in the region. It is using them as best it can to promote regional unity, stability, peace and justice. That this is so can be seen to the full in three-way summit in Beirut with Custodian of The Two Holy Mosques King

Abdullah, President Michel Suleiman and Prime Minister Saad Hariri of Lebanon and President Bashar Al Assad of Syria.

The summit is testimony to Saudi Arabia's part in bringing Syria and Lebanon closer together. For the past five years, ever since the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, the two countries have been virtual enemies. The anti-Syrian movement in Lebanon, led by Saad Hariri, held the Syrians responsible for his father's assassination and accused it of continuing efforts to destabilize the country through its protégés in Hezbollah. For its part, there was resentment in Damascus at being forced to pull its troops out of Lebanon and having to admit that Lebanon is a separate Arab state.

Even a year ago, it would have been difficult to imagine Hariri and Bashar sitting down together. But times have moved on and the three-way summit draws something of a line under Lebanon's and Syria's recent difficult relationship — although it would be foolish to predict an unquestionably smooth ride from here on. Hariri leads a government of national unity but questions remain over Hezbollah's membership of it. Some in Lebanon say it remains a state within a state. There is also the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon investigating the assassination of Hariri. If it blames Syria or Hezbollah, there could be trouble.

However, that is not inevitable. As this summit shows, reconciliation is at work. But it is about far more than just Lebanese-Syrian reconciliation. It is about moving the region away from its internal divisions so it can work together for regional peace and resolve the Palestinian issue. The Lebanese summit is just the third leg (Sharm El-Sheikh and Damascus being the first two, Amman the last) in a bigger four-state tour by the king aimed at strengthening Arab unity and effectiveness on a host of issues — Darfur and divisions in Iraq also being among them — but particularly in dealing with Israel. It has to be. Arab disunity has always been Israel's trump card, not to mention a massive block on progress — political, economic and social — in the Arab world.

It is Saudi Arabia's cherished dream to remove it.

Source: <http://arabnews.com/opinion/editorial/article92967.ece>

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