Syria’s Fate is Inseparable from the League of Arab States

Algeria is hosting the Arab League summit next March, and perhaps the essential item on the agenda will be Syria’s return to the League of Arab States (LAS). The Arab Republic of Syria membership was suspended at the Arab Summit in Doha, Qatar, in 2012. In retrospect, this was a hasty and ill- advised decision by Arab governments in the midst of what is now commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, and it by no means served the interests of Arab countries. To make matters worse, the Doha summit also made a rather strange decision, contrary to the LAS Charter, to allow the Syrian opposition to take the place of the Syrian government at meetings of this apex forum for all Arab countries. It might be interesting what country this Syrian opposition represented and represents today. Its leadership and most of its members were abroad, financed, and dancing to the tune of the monarchical regimes of the Persian Gulf and Western countries, whose leaders did not have friendly feelings for the Syrian people and their problems.

At the time, the Arab world was amidst a tumultuous wave of regime change in many Arab republics. These changes were due to some strange alliance between foreign and regional governments operating with some Arab monarchies with domestic political forces originating from political Islam and led by the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in the Russian Federation). The Brotherhood retained its name in this Islamist movement’s homeland (Egypt), but it had different and varied designations in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. However, the Brotherhood did not change its essence and tried to lead the Islamist movement and put several Arab countries under its control.

Historically and strategically, regardless of the various rulers and governments operating in Damascus, Syria has always been a major stabilizing force in Arab politics and in protecting Arab national interests. Together with Egypt,
this has been the basis of the territorial integrity of the Arab states.

From an Egyptian perspective, Egypt’s strategic borders lie on Syria’s northern borders with Turkey and Syria’s eastern borders with Iraq. This may explain why, despite Syria’s withdrawal from the alliance with Egypt in September 1961, the coalition lasted from February 1958 until the end of 1961. The two Egyptian Armies were designated as the Second and Third Armies, with the former being in Syria. The three armies fought a joint war of liberation against Israel in October 1973. Needless to say, the two Egyptian Armies would never have been able to storm the Suez Canal in 1973 without the Syrian Army’s involvement. The way the war ended is a useful and timely reminder of the strategic costs of separating Egypt and Syria.

Between 2012 and 2015, the international, regional, and some Arab monarchies competed to have Syria as a prize. For the powers that supported the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and those who opposed him, the Arab Republic of Syria was a battleground of competing and opposed strategic interests. The three regional powers that have always tried to weaken Syria, namely Israel, Turkey, and Iran, have benefited from the fight over Syria. The Iranians have strengthened their presence in the heart of the Middle East, significantly increasing their stakes and chances against Israel. In addition, by becoming almost a neighbor to Egypt, the Iranians have forced Egypt, once the leader of the entire Arab world, to also reckon with their interests. Through its pre-Arab Spring zero-trouble policy with Syria and other Middle Eastern countries, Turkey has become an active channel for supplying arms and aid to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups fighting in the name of Islam to topple the legitimate Assad regime. As for the Israelis, guided by the elusive principle of self-defense, they have turned Syria into a direct theater of war with Iranians and other Arab militias who have come to defend the legitimate Syrian Government and the right of Syrians to live freely under their own laws. Of course, taking advantage of their military superiority and blatantly violating all international laws, the Israelis have bombed Syrian territory with impunity, including the capital, Damascus, killing innocent Syrian civilians. Israel’s current rulers are oblivious that there might come a time when the Syrians could take revenge and also bomb Israeli territory. They say time never stands still.

The USA is categorically claiming that its presence in Syria, on the one hand, is “legitimate” and serves as a sort of rebuff to Russia, which has the only military base in the Middle East in that country. On the other hand, Syria has become for the Americans not only a country of confrontation but a way to consolidate their increasingly diminishing presence in the Middle East, after their shameful flight from Afghanistan. The irony is that the Washington Administration is slyly trying to justify its stay in Syria by allegedly fighting terrorism and terrorist groups by sacrificing the finances and lives of American soldiers on the altar of democracy and freedom. Some Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, wishing to justify their outrageous and blatant interference in the affairs of sovereign Syria, are also trying to follow in Washington’s footsteps, claiming that they are also defending democracy and human rights. These regimes should first bring true democracy and freedom to their monarchies.

Between 2012 and 2017, the briefly unified Syrian opposition disintegrated into different political factions, handed over to either a foreign or regional power or an Arab monarchy. Currently, no credible Syrian opposition can effectively work with the government in Damascus and the international community to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 2015. It has become the accepted road map for a democratic transition in Syria with the sole aim of bringing an end to the various conflicts in Syrian territory and bringing peace and prosperity to the frayed Syrian land.

Fighting for Syria by force, regardless of the stated political and ideological justifications, has been the permanent feature of the past decade. Still, today it is apparently coming to an end. Over the past year, there has been a dramatic shift in stakeholders’ positions, especially in most Arab countries. The UAE and Jordan took their first steps in this direction when the Emirates reopened its Embassy in Damascus and sent its Foreign Minister to meet with President Bashar al-Assad earlier this year. Abdullah II of Jordan was also on the phone with President Bashar al-Assad. President of Saudi Arabia’s General Intelligence Directorate met with his Syrian counterpart last month in Cairo on the margins of a meeting organized by the directors of various Arab intelligence agencies. Egypt stated that it was in favor of restoring the rights of the legitimate government of Damascus to the League of Arab States. This would be an event that would restore a certain balance of power in the League of Arab States and, more importantly, in the Arab world.

Arab politics and countries’ fates in a transformed Middle East will benefit from Syria regaining its place in the League of Arab States. Many diplomats and politicians doubt that the expulsion of Damascus over the past nine years has served the interests of the Arab world. A weakened Syria has not helped any Arab cause or interest. On the contrary, it has further destabilized the balance of power between the Arab countries and the three regional
powers - Israel, Turkey, and Iran. The intensification of the Saudi-Iranian confrontation is just one example in this regard. Suppose the next Arab summit in Algeria reverses the shameful 2012 decision to withdraw Syria from the League of Arab States. In that case, it will bring a much-needed end to the unhappy and destabilizing Arab Spring. The return of the Arab Republic of Syria to the Arab fold would be a turning point in the Middle East that would contribute to a new Arab balance of power concerning the three aforementioned regional powers. Like Arabs elsewhere in the Arab world, Syrians need such a restructuring to defend their national interests in the bitter and relentless struggle for power in the Middle East to establish peace and prosperity in that very turbulent region of the globe.

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