

HIGH STAKES AND LOW EXPECTATIONS AT ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT IN BAGHDAD

Arab leaders will meet in Baghdad on Thursday for the first Arab League summit since the Arab Spring reshaped the politics of the Middle East and North Africa. The last summit, on March 28, 2010, was held in Sirte, the hometown of Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi, primarily to discuss Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories. Since then, Qaddafi was killed after months of rebellion and civil war, and dictators were ousted in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. The summit planned for Baghdad in 2011 was postponed because of this regional instability, and in the meantime Islamist political blocs made significant gains in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. This week's summit looks significantly different from the last and has different implications for its participants, the Arab world as a whole, and other powers with interests in the region.

Syria will be the central focus of the summit, despite its suspension from the Arab League in November 2011 in response to President Bashar al-Assad's crackdown on uprisings there. Since then, the situation has continued to devolve into a humanitarian crisis as well as a serious threat to regional stability. Kofi Annan, the United Nations envoy to the Arab League, has received UN Security Council support for a six-point proposal that calls for the Syrian regime and opposition to work with Annan towards political reconciliation, and a draft resolution, expected to be discussed on Thursday, calls on Arab League members to support the proposal. Qatar has been leading the push by Sunni-dominated Gulf states to send Arab and international peacekeepers into Syria. Iraq has expressed support for the idea of an Arab League peacekeeping force, but has stopped short of endorsing the Qatari proposal, with Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari instead implying that Iraq supports a transfer of power without wishing to dictate terms to Syria.

For Iraq, the summit is a showcase. After years as a battlefield for regional and international powers, Iraq is keen to demonstrate its domestic stability and its international presence. The former will be difficult enough: the week before the summit, a coordinated wave of attacks by Al Qaeda killed more than 50 people across Iraq. The Iraqi government responded by closing airspace around Baghdad, deploying more than 100,000 extra security personnel across the city, and setting up hundreds of checkpoints and roadblocks in the days before the summit. In addition, Baghdad has spent an estimated \$500 million on refurbishing facilities, enraging residents of Baghdad who continue to live with threadbare services and intermittent power, and will deal for the next week with limited mobility and increased goods prices.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki faces a difficult situation at the summit. On one hand, the meeting offers Maliki the possibility of strengthening his position following the political crisis caused by his attempts to sideline Sunni domestic rivals. Maliki has demonstrated skill in convincing the leaders of Sunni Arab states to come to Baghdad, striking a number of bilateral agreements in recent weeks in an attempt to overcome long-held personal enmities, particularly with Saudi Arabia. Too energetic an embrace of the Gulf States, however, particularly on Syria, is likely to upset Iran, which might respond by encouraging Sadrists, Shiite militants and separatists, and Kurds to make Maliki's life more difficult. On the other hand, serious resistance to Arab League proposals on Syria may excite Gulf State suspicions about Iranian influence in Iraq, encouraging them to support Sunni movements for autonomy within Iraq.

Iraqi officials have maintained that a key issue on the agenda is the structural reform of the Arab League itself. The Kuwaiti Speaker of the Arab Parliament, Ali al-Daqbasi, recently announced his intention to bring a four-person delegation to convince Arab leaders to make the Arab Parliament permanent, “so that it can practice its right to legislate unified Arab laws” and make binding decisions.

Participants will also discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian question, and measures to combat terrorism and extremism. Iraq has said that it expects representation from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity, and the European Union. While it remains doubtful that far-reaching decisions will emerge, the summit will likely provide a sharp lens through which to view the newly reconfigured Arab world and the strategic imperatives it implies for international observers.

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