



INSS Insight No. 294, November 16, 2011

Syria and the Arab League: Moral Censure and Identity Politics

Mark A. Heller

On November 12, 2011, the League of Arab States suspended the membership of one of its founding partners, the Syrian Arab Republic. This is not a totally unprecedented measure, but it is nevertheless highly significant, not because the League itself is a unified and effective international actor but rather because it may well be a harbinger of future actions by many of its constituent governments.

The League's decision has had an immediate impact in a symbolic sense, by undermining the self-confidence of the Syrian regime while bolstering the morale of the opposition. Moreover, the effect may become material if Arab governments empower the League to follow up on hints of sanctions against the Syrian regime and more tangible support for the opposition. Leaders of the Syrian National Council, the main opposition group, have already been invited to League headquarters in Cairo for further discussions, and King Abdullah of Jordan has publicly called for Syrian President Bashar al-Asad to step aside.

Given the League's generally anodyne posture on inter-Arab relations, the explanation for these actions almost certainly goes beyond moral revulsion at Asad's brutality in trying to repress the domestic uprising against his regime. Of course, that is not altogether irrelevant. Despite the severe restrictions on credible reporting from Syria, it is clear that Asad's security forces have already killed at least 3,500 protesters, wounded, abused, or imprisoned thousands of others, and impelled many others to seek refuge across the Turkish, Lebanese, or Jordanian borders. In an environment of growing criticism, Arab League representatives pushed for a peace plan involving the withdrawal of troops from urban areas, the release of prisoners, and a pardon for opposition leaders. The Syrian government formally accepted this plan but then refused to implement it. That was inevitably seen as intransigence, and almost a year into the Arab spring, Arab governments are perforce more attentive to public sentiments about how governments should or should not behave. In other words, Asad is undoubtedly paying a price for what he does.

But the price is compounded by who he is – a member of the Alawite sect associated with Shiism and a leader who, following in the footsteps of his father, has kept his Syrian Arab Republic aligned with Shiite Iran (and against most Sunni Arabs) for more than three decades. This seems an even more powerful explanatory factor than repugnance at Asad's behavior.

After all, other Arab leaders have responded to domestic insurgencies with similar or greater brutality, yet the commanders of the military regime during the civil war in Algeria, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen all escaped the sanctions now being visited on Asad. In fact, there are only two notable exceptions to the League's customary refusal to censure Arab governments. One was Egypt, which was temporarily expelled from the League in 1979, not because its government was excessively repressive but because it broke Arab ranks and made peace with Israel. The other was Libya in 2011, but almost certainly only because its leader had personally insulted, alienated, and physically threatened so many other leaders in the Arab world. Moreover, Egypt was soon readmitted following the outbreak of Iran-Iraq War, when its active help was needed to stem the threat of Iranian expansion. That provides a major clue to the subtext of recent Arab diplomatic maneuvering: the need to counter Iran's hegemonial ambitions, sometimes pursued through local Shiites seen to be acting as agents of Iranian influence.

The persuasiveness of that clue is reinforced by the identity of the leading forces behind the recent initiative aimed at Asad: Qatar and Saudi Arabia, two Gulf states in close proximity to Iran. There is some irony in this. After all, neither Qatar nor Saudi Arabia is itself a paragon of democratic values. Both had supported the suppression of the revolt against the Sunni monarchy in Shiite-majority Bahrain – the Saudis through direct military intervention – not in order to ensure respect for human rights but rather to check Iran, which was suspected of providing support to the protesters in Bahrain or at least of standing to benefit from their success. Additional evidence in favor of the sectarian explanation for the targeting of Asad may be gleaned from the identity of those who voted against Syria's suspension – Yemen and Lebanon, along with Syria itself – or merely abstained – Iraq. Given the state of affairs in Yemen, the Yemenis may have simply been concerned about a worrisome precedent (although the decision to allow Saleh to return to San'a following prolonged medical treatment in Saudi Arabia suggests that such a concern is probably overblown). But both Lebanon and Iraq are fragmented states with powerful Shiite communities and Shiite-dominated or Shiite-constrained governments subject to significant Iranian influence.

All of this suggests that while Asad's actions may well be out of step with the spirit of the times in the Arab world, the singular character of the Arab League's actions against him may well be inspired by a factor that is never officially acknowledged but constantly

hovers in the background. Sectarianism is the dirty laundry of Arab politics. Almost a year after the repression of the upheaval in Bahrain, eight years after the outbreak of internecine conflict in Iraq, and more than thirty-five years after the onset of the Lebanese civil war, it is still normally downplayed or denied, and when manifestations of its existence prove impossible to ignore, the tendency is still to blame it on the machinations of malevolent outsiders: Iran, the United States, or Israel (which has been accused of inciting the latest round of Islamist-inspired attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt). A new era of pluralism and openness may yet emerge in the Arab world, but the old era of identity politics has not yet passed.

