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Out of its League

The Arab League is leaning on the UN Security Council to keep its mission working in Syria, reports

Dina Ezzat

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It is a matter of time before the Arab League and/or other forms of Arab intervention in the Syrian crisis comes to an end, according to the assessment of concerned Arab and Western diplomats.

But not quite yet, and not in order to give way to international intervention, political or otherwise, according to concerned Arab diplomats.

According to one Arab League diplomat, "at this point in time neither the Arab League -- at least not the secretariat and a few capitals -- nor Syria are willing to completely terminate the operation of the Arab League mission" that has been assigned to monitor the commitment of the Syrian government to end violence against demonstrators, mostly peaceful, who have been for close to a year demanding a change of regime in their country.

The same diplomat added that Arab League Secretary-General Nabil El-Arabi is convinced that if given the time and the chance, the mission in Syria could, in parallel with political interventions on his side in key regional and world capitals, help reduce the level of violence in Syria significantly pending the initiation of "some form of dialogue between the regime and the opposition" in Syria and in exile.

"The secretary-general is really aware that it is a matter of time before President Bashar Al-Assad would have to give up his presidency but he believes that there is an opportunity to accomplish this mission in an 'organised fashion' to avoid chaos in Syria," said another Arab League diplomat. He added that the concern over a post-Assad chaos, and maybe even a civil war among the many ethnic groupings of the Syrian population is a concern shared with other Arab capitals neighbouring Syria and for that matter with key regional capitals, especially Tehran, which has been talking to the Arab League through Iraq and some Western states.

So far, however, no organised plan has solicited sufficient support from the key concerned players in and out of Syria.

Arab and Western diplomats say that the most likely option at this point is a scheme that is presented by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the most anti-Assad grouping within the Arab League, for the Syrian president to transfer his responsibilities to one of his aides pending an all inclusive national dialogue between representatives of the ruling regime and all opposition groups to peacefully introduce a replacement for the regime of Al-Assad that was initiated with Hafez Al-Assad, the deceased father of the current Syrian president, in the early 1970s.

So far, Al-Assad has completely declined to open the door for negotiations on this deal -- which is not yet soliciting sufficient support from all the Syrian opposition groupings.

"Still this is the only solid offer that is on the table," commented a Cairo-based foreign diplomat who follows the Syria file closely. He added that this offer is perhaps more likely to fly than another offer formally offered by Russia for a wide and exhaustive process of national Syrian dialogue that would conclude with an agreement on reforms, as a first step, to be followed by the eventual termination of the regime of Al-Assad when the current mandate expires in 2014. This initiative has been directly shrugged off by most of the in-exile Syrian opposition groups and some of the Syria-based groups -- with some proposing a dialogue between Russia and the Arab League on the basis that the former would represent the views of Damascus and that the latter would offer the views of the opposition following the convocation of an all inclusive opposition conference for consultations on the future of Syria.

The Arab League, according to its officials, conveyed a clear message to Moscow during a recent contact between the secretary-general and the Russian foreign minister, that for any initiative to seriously pick up Damascus would have to significantly reduce rather than increase the level of violence against demonstrators.

A few days ago, before flying out to New York to take part in a special UN Security Council session on Syria that was scheduled for Tuesday evening, El-Arabi announced the suspension of the Arab League mission in Syria due to the increased volume of violence by the regime against demonstrators.

The decision, according to Arab sources, was taken partially due to much pressure but also by the influential GCC capitals which had withdrawn their observers from the mission, followed by Morocco which traditionally keeps close to Saudi Arabia in its foreign relations.

El-Arabi, however, has not fully pulled back the mission which could resume its operation pending support from the UN Security Council for its mandate and an enforcement of its limited capacities.

Meanwhile, El-Arabi is still hoping that Russia and Iran would convince Syria to allow a high-level Arab mediation team to arrive in Damascus for talks on potential exits from the current crisis.

Late last week, the secretary-general of the Arab League proposed that former director-general of the International Agency for Atomic Energy and Nobel Laureate, Mohamed El-Baradei, head a high-level mission to Syria.

Damascus categorically declined the choice of El-Baradei and to a lesser extent the offer for the mediation, which came after the suspension of the Arab League observers mission in Syria.

However, according to several Arab diplomats the rejection to receive the mission is not final. "The Syrians would wait and see what comes out of the UN Security Council and then make a decision and maybe ask for someone that they could trust to be head of the mission," said an Arab diplomat.

In New York for the UN Security Council session on Syria, El-Arabi consulted with international interlocutors on the possible mandate of the mission and the chances to make it a joint Arab League-UN mission and, according to Arab League sources, he received positive nods.

"We are not sure how things will unfold; it depends on the choices of the Syrian regime and whether or not it sees a light at the end of the tunnel for a graceful and long term exit or it feels that it is being painted in a corner and thus decides to augment the volume of violence," suggested an Arab League source.

On 9 February, at the Qatari capital, the Arab League is scheduled to hold a meeting to ponder its next move on Syria. According to Arab League sources, the ministerial meeting is likely to spell out a clear message of warning to the Assad regime that patience is wearing very thin and that the time has come for the head of the regime to revisit his position beyond the support of Russia and China, which is likely to persist but which is unlikely to block others from inducing harsh economic sanctions on Syria.

The meeting, according to the same sources, would consider ways to enforce the operation of the mission in Syria but would make the operation of the mission conditional on the cooperation of the Syrian regime that would have to otherwise accept an Arab announcement of the withdrawal of the mission in what would amount to indictment of the Syrian regime of determined coercion of demonstrators.

Should an agreement be concluded between the Arab League and the UN on a mediation mission to be conducted strictly by the Arab organisation or jointly by both the Arab League

and the UN then the ministerial meeting would demand of the Syrian authorities to cooperate with the offer for mediation.