

The Next Arab Summit:

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

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Brief Analysis

In the weeks since Yasir Arafat first called for an emergency Arab summit to address the peace process stalemate, Arab capitals have responded with near-unanimous support for the idea. But despite that agreement-in-principle, actual planning for a summit has been hampered by disputes among Arab countries on a few minor details -- such as who, what, when, where, why, and how to convene it.

Who: Disagreements have arisen over how large and inclusive the summit should be. One idea, favored by the Palestinians and the Syrians, is to have a full Arab summit. Others have suggested limiting the attendance in various ways, such as to states directly involved in the peace process or to a few leading Arab states. Saudi Arabia proposed a preliminary meeting of the Arab states that "ring" Israel -- Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority -- for them to resolve their differences and reach a consensus in preparation for a wider summit.

Even more contentious has been the question of inviting Iraq to a potential all-inclusive summit. Governments concerned with U.S. opinion were reluctant to anger Washington by offering Iraq this tangible symbol of acceptance. Kuwait announced that it would not -- and indeed could not -- veto Iraqi participation, but would reserve the right not to attend the summit itself. Predictably, Iraq responded angrily.

What: Everyone agrees that the summit agenda should be well-planned and coordinated in advance to avoid embarrassing the participants. However, they have been unable to agree on what the agenda and the desired outcomes should be. Syria is pushing for clear, concerted action against Israel that would be binding on all participants, including a suspension or termination of all "normalization" efforts. In contrast, countries like Jordan are resisting resolutions that would force them to sever economic, military or other ties with Israel. Among Arab states with some relations with Israel, Jordan would suffer the most immediate and painful losses from a summit decree to cut ties with Israel. Rhetorical questioning by King Hussein about the possibility of wealthy Arab states compensating him financially for this loss of trade and other benefits prompted an uncharacteristically direct "no" from the Saudis.

Another "what" issue still unresolved is whether the summit should limit itself to discussion of the Arab-Israeli peace process or expand the agenda to include other matters of importance to the Arab world, like UN sanctions on Libya, the widespread killing in Algeria, and the impending starvation in Sudan. A broader agenda would dilute the summit's emphasis on branding Israel as the source of the peace process impasse -- and therefore would not please Syria and the PLO. Paradoxically, such a full agenda would be more likely if attendance included states outside the Arab-Israel "confrontation zone," as favored by Asad and Arafat.

When: Moderates and radicals in the Arab world tend to disagree about the urgency of holding the summit without delay. The issue is whether to hold the summit now, when the "further redeployment" plan remains under the Israeli government's active consideration, or to wait until such time as the U.S. government has grown so exasperated with the slow pace of the process that it decides to publicize its plan and parcel out blame and praise to parties that have

rejected it or accepted it. Washington apparently asked its friends in the Arab world to hold off so as to provide more time to win Israeli agreement on the second redeployment.

Where: Choosing the site of the summit is closely related to the determining its agenda and defining the political environment in which it will be held. Syria wants the summit to be in Damascus, which was designated at the last Arab summit as the venue for the next gathering of Arab leaders. Jordan has resisted this idea because it would necessitate a certain deference to the host's hardline political views; instead, Amman has preferred that the summit be held in Riyadh or at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo. This disagreement between Syria and Jordan has reignited longstanding tensions that erupted at the last major Arab summit, following Netanyahu's 1996 election. (That was when King Hussein handed President Hafiz al-Asad a dossier on Syrian terrorism against Jordan.) Echoing Syria's scathing criticism of Jordan's separate and relatively warm peace with Israel, the pro-government Damascus daily newspaper al-Ba'ath editorialized that "some parties... exploited the occasion [of talking about a summit] to feign concern for the Arab cause, polish their image, and conceal their true relations and dealings, which have stabbed this cause in the heart."

Why: Though the rationale for convening the summit seems clear -- to condemn Israeli "intransigence" as the cause for the peace process impasse and to "unify Arab ranks" to confront Israeli "schemes" to divide the Arabs -- there are significant differences among Arab states as to the summit's practical objectives. Reading and listening to their rhetoric, it appears that parties that have signed agreements with Israel (i.e., Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinians) call for a summit as the way to save the peace process by pressuring Israel to be more forthcoming in negotiations. In contrast, those that have criticized these bilateral peace arrangements and other acts of inter-Arab "treason" (e.g., Syria, Iraq and others) want the summit to serve as a death certificate for the peace process and a license for adopting new strategies of steadfastness and confrontation in the conflict with Israel. These alternative approaches are generally left vague, although they always include halting normalization in order to isolate Israel politically and economically. Some proposals have hinted at recalling ambassadors and reactivating the secondary and tertiary aspects of the Arab boycott.

How: With all these unanswered questions, considerable doubt remains about how the Arab leaders will find the wherewithal to overcome their disagreements and convene a summit. After all the urgent discussion about the summit over the past few months, and with all the intra-Arab shuttle diplomacy (mostly by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah) that has already been invested in preparing for one, failure to hold any summit -- large or small -- will inevitably be portrayed in the Arab world as another humiliating political defeat for the Arabs. However, popular expectations for a productive summit are so high that holding one without adequate guarantees for more than a photo-op will result in even deeper disappointment and disillusionment.

Implications for the United States: The primary U.S. concerns about a possible Arab summit are that it could exacerbate an already tense regional situation, complicate Israel's internal deliberations about a further redeployment, and isolate and intimidate the few true partisans of the peace process that remain in the Arab world (e.g., Jordan). At the same time, recent U.S. efforts to influence the public positions of friendly Arab countries, ranging from promoting the Doha economic summit to seeking public backing for the use of force against Iraq, have registered a poor track record.

Against that backdrop, the most prudent path for Washington would be, in the first instance, to allow inter-Arab politics to run their course, which may scuttle the summit. Should the summit ultimately be convened anyway, quiet diplomacy with America's Arab allies would be the best chance to lessen the negative affects of a summit on the peace process. A high-profile diplomatic push may make the summit more likely to occur, give it more credence than it would otherwise have, and thus backfire against wider U.S. regional interests.

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