

The Islamic Summit in Tehran:

Beyond the Hype

by [Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](/experts/martin-kramer)

Dec 9, 1997

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](/experts/martin-kramer)

Martin Kramer is The Washington Institute's Walter P. Stern Fellow and author of one of its most widely read monographs, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*.



Brief Analysis

Two widespread analyses have accompanied this morning's opening of the eighth summit conference of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). The first is that the turnout—the "full house," as one Iranian newspaper put it—demonstrates the failure of the U.S. effort to isolate Iran. The second is that the showing reflects "anger" with the stalemate in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Both analyses accept dubious Iranian claims at face value and misread the import of the Tehran Islamic summit.

SMOKE AND MIRRORS: Does the turnout spell the end of Iran's isolation? Iran has tried to give the impression that the conference has been exceptionally well attended. ("Every single member of the 55-nation organization is present," boasted one Iranian daily.) While there are heads of state from countries like the Maldives and Mali, the Arab states are the major players in the OIC, and Iranian sources argue that their attendance at the summit signals an acceptance of Iran for what it is, by many of the revolution's worst foes of the past.

But in fact, the level of attendance by Arab heads-of-state suggests something very different: a deep-seated Arab reticence about Iran's regional role, and especially its support for Islamist movements. Leaving aside Iran's long-time Syrian ally, and the special cases of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait (see below), the other major Arab heads-of-state have absented themselves.

Morocco's King Hasan II is not in Tehran, although Morocco has been a pillar of the OIC: King Hasan hosted the first Islamic summit in 1969 and the most recent summit in 1994, and he heads the OIC's Jerusalem Committee.

Egyptian President Husni Mubarak has also stayed home. (He will not have to traverse Islambouli Boulevard, the Tehran street named after Anwar Sadat's assassin.) Tunisia's President Ben Ali has also stayed away, as has Algeria's President Liamine Zeroual and Jordan's King Husayn. In fact, only six of twenty-two Arab states are represented by heads of state.

In most of these instances, the absence of a head of state is largely a refusal to legitimate Iran so long as it sides with the cause of Islamism. Arab leaders who face Islamist opposition movements still see Iran as a source of moral and even material support for their principal domestic foes. A summit is not the time to level charges, and the Arab

foreign ministers who are substituting for heads-of-state have been instructed to express vague desires for closer ties with Iran. (A typical example from Egypt's foreign minister: "Recent regional developments have brought the positions of Iran and Egypt closer to each other. We must pave the way for boosting relations.") But these lukewarm utterances-hardly ringing endorsements of Iran's regime or policies-are no compensation for the absence of major Arab heads-of-state from a summit conference, especially after a year of intensive Iranian diplomacy.

Still, lower-level Arab delegations are in Tehran. Does this signal slippage toward the Iranian view of the Arab-Israeli peace process? Iran's view is one of complete rejection of any process liable to legitimate Israel. In his speech this morning, Iran's quasi-spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, called the principle of land-for-peace a "joke." Iranian President Mohammed Khatemi was mildly more charitable: he described the peace process as "undignified and unjust."

But the draft resolutions now on the table demonstrate that Iran is alone in this blanket rejection of the peace process. OIC summits and foreign ministers' conferences have passed many resolutions during recent years critical of Israel, yet supportive of the peace process initiated at Madrid. The draft resolutions of the Tehran summit criticize Israel for "reinstating an atmosphere of war," and urge "reconsideration" of normalization by member states. But they also express full support for the peace process and the relevant U.N. resolutions. In sum, most of the Arab states have found a way to avoid endorsing Iran's regime and its policies, even while representing their own interests in Tehran. To read into this ritual of unity some sea change in Arab alignments is to mistake shadow for substance, and succumb to the media hype Iran has worked so assiduously to create around the summit.

What then can be learned from the Tehran summit? Its real significance lies in its confirmation of two trends already underway for several years. The first is the tendency of two of the weakest Arab states, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to seek an extra measure of security by conciliating Iran. The second is the tendency of Turkey to write off the Arabs altogether.

THE GULF RECONCILIATION: On entering the Tehran conference hall, participants see a lavish drapery by the dais. This drapery, embroidered with verses of the Quran in gold and silver thread, once covered of the door of the Holy Ka'ba, the shrine in the Great Mosque in Mecca. It is a gift offered to the Iranian hosts by Saudi Arabia.

It is also a symbol of the melioration in Saudi-Iranian relations. In 1987, with war still raging between Iran and Iraq, Saudi police and Iranian pilgrims battled in Mecca, and 402 persons died, most of them Iranian pilgrims. The Saudis charged the Iranians with seeking to defile the Ka'ba itself; Ayatollah Khomeini announced that Mecca was in the hands of "a band of heretics."

Since then, Saudi-Iranian relations have been on a slow but steady mend. Khomeini's death and the end of the Iran-Iraq war diminished the perception of an Iranian threat; Iraq's invasion of Kuwait demonstrated to Saudi Arabia that its "Arab brethren" were just as threatening if not more so.

In 1991, Saudi Arabia was still reeling from the Iraqi "betrayal," and Iran sensed an opening: the two countries agreed then that Iran would host the 1997 OIC summit. This left six years to improve Saudi-Iranian relations-years used to good effect. This week, when Iran's President Mohammed Khatemi embraced Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah with kisses on both cheeks at Tehran's airport, the gesture crowned years of healing diplomacy. Similar diplomacy brought Kuwait's ruling emir, Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah, to Tehran. Their presence at the summit has nothing to do with frustration over the peace process or rage against the U.S. It continues a time-honored practice in the Gulf of the weak conciliating the strong.

TURKISH DISENCHANTMENT: The other memorable aspect of the summit is its underlining of Turkey's growing differences with its Arab neighbors. For two decades, Turkey saw the OIC as an important venue for mustering Muslim and especially Arab support for the cause of Turkish Cyprus. But Turkey is now embroiled in bilateral

disputes with its Arab neighbors over terrorism, Kurds, and water, and these neighbors now seek Turkey's condemnation by the OIC. At drafting sessions for the Tehran summit, Syria urged that Turkey be condemned for its military cooperation with Israel; Iraq asked that it be condemned for its "aggression" against northern Iraq.

Other Arab states worked to tone down the final drafts of these resolutions: one now urges states to "reconsider" military ties with Israel, another calls for respecting Iraq's territorial integrity, and neither mentions Turkey by name. But the OIC has now become a place for Turkish-Arab conflict-and an arena from which Turkey expects nothing of substance. The first visit ever by an Israeli defense minister to Turkey has coincided precisely with the summit, a firm signal of where Turkey's priorities now lie.

THE MORNING AFTER: What will be the legacy of the Tehran summit to the region? It will have changed nothing in the position of its member-states toward Israel, or of the non-Gulf Arab states toward Iran. It will be seen as another stage in the Saudi and Kuwaiti search for Gulf security, and as a way station of Turkey as it opts out of the rituals of Islamic solidarity. For the people of Iran, it seems safe to assume that it will mean less than Iran's recent soccer victory by which it qualified for the World Cup in France.

Martin Kramer, a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, is director of the Moshe Dayan for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of the entry on "Islamic conferences" in the Encyclopedia of Islam, the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, and the Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East.

Policy #287

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](/policy-analysis/iran)