

# The Doha Summit: A 'Virtual Conference'

Nov 11, 1997



## Brief Analysis

**A**gainst the backdrop of a brewing confrontation with Iraq, Secretary of State Albright travels to the nearby state of Qatar later this week to talk about regional economic development. Despite Albright's presence, many Arab countries—including regional leaders Egypt and Saudi Arabia—have declared that they will boycott the fourth annual Middle East/North Africa economic conference due to open next Sunday in Doha. Only the Palestinian Authority has still not responded to the Qataris' invitation.

Although the event is a decidedly business-oriented conclave, pre-conference maneuvering has had much more to do with politics than economics. The program, titled "Creating a New Private/Public Partnership for Trade and Economic Growth Beyond the Year 2000," focuses on making contacts among various public and private interests; holding discussions and workshops about privatization, globalization, business and management strategies; and showcasing investment opportunities in Middle Eastern states. While the program reflects the need for competitiveness in the global economy, accounts of the conference by politicians or in the media invariably refer to the Doha conference as an attempt to bolster Arab-Israeli "normalization."

Washington: Doha's Chief Booster: Though the multilateral peace process has rarely received high-level attention in the State Department, Washington has taken the lead in acting as the conference's chief patron ever since Albright announced her intention to head the U.S. delegation to Doha. The U.S. position has two main planks - first, that Doha is important for all Middle Easterners if they are truly committed to economic growth and second, that Doha is an important symbol that the peace process is still alive, even if it is going through a difficult time.

While U.S. officials have pointed out the economic benefits of the MENA conferences, they have realized that they cannot ignore the political context. They have tried to strike a balance, underscoring that the conference is not a favor to Israel but rather an opportunity for the entire region. Policymakers have argued that regional cooperation should not remain hostage to strained bilateral talks, and that this is an opportunity for Middle Easterners to make their case for foreign investment directly to world economic players. The Commerce Department has reminded Arab leaders that even when trade with Israel is removed from the picture, inter-Arab trade lags behind the rates of intra-regional trade in other regions, i.e., trade among Arab states accounts for just 7 percent of the region's commerce, whereas intra-regional trade amounts to 60 percent of Europe's total. Washington has also let Arab states know that participation at Doha is a virtual test of their relationship with the United States. An Egyptian newspaper reported that Cairo was angered by a message from Albright to Foreign Minister 'Amr Musa, in which she reportedly warned that an Egyptian boycott, or attendance at less than the Foreign Minister level, would be viewed in Washington as "a serious mistake."

Flagging Arab Interest: Syria has led the opposition to the conference, joined predictably by Lebanon, Libya, and Iran. None of these countries have ever participated in the MENA conferences, and none were invited to Doha. "Conditional opposition" has come from Morocco and Egypt, two of the three previous MENA hosts, as well as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These states have based their refusal to attend on what they view as Israel's

intransigence in the peace process. Today, Egypt's President Mubarak specifically cited Israeli "persistence in building settlements" in announcing his country's refusal to send a delegation to Doha.

Qatar has denied having disagreements with other Arabs over this conference. However, in response to threats of potential sabotage, the Qataris have temporarily barred the entry of nationals from ten Middle Eastern states. Indeed, conference critics accuse Arab states that plan to attend—such as Jordan and Tunisia—of defying the Arab consensus and selling out the Arab nation to please Washington. Some in the region have made it clear that they see it as their duty to make sure the conference does not succeed. The Abu Nidal Organization, for example, issued a statement saying that the Qataris' insistence on holding the conference is "an invitation to the provocation of violence."

The radicals are not the only forces in the Arab world arguing against Doha; in many capitals, media and public opinion are firmly against participation. In host Qatar, public opinion polls show that a majority oppose the conference. Marwan Kanafani, an advisor to Yasser Arafat, said, "We do not oppose participation in the Doha conference for any reason relating to the conference itself. We are against participation because Israel does not want to implement the other aspect of peace—namely, the political aspect—and insists on obtaining economic gains without implementing its political commitments. In my opinion, this is unjust and unacceptable to us." As Mubarak rhetorically asked: "What is the use of holding a conference if all parties are turning their backs on each other?"

Some Arabs point to the last three MENA conferences as evidence that Arab states do not benefit from these events. The president of Yemen, one of the few states to commit early to attending the conference, expressed the concern that none of the conferences have benefitted any of the Arab states. He said, "The Arabs do not stand to gain from this parley. It is part of the indirect normalization of Israel ties...It is the Netanyahu government that stands to gain from such conferences, which are part of the efforts to effect indirect normalization of its Arab ties." Even in Jordan, one of the few Arab states to announce that it would send a high-level delegation to Doha, the president of the Amman Chamber of Industry complained that the last three MENA summits have only benefitted Israel. In fact, each of the past MENA hosts—Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt—have recorded positive growth rates over the past three years, though of course numerous factors have contributed to these trends.

Doha: The Bottom Line: On the bright side, it now looks assured that Doha will proceed according to schedule. With intensive U.S. encouragement and reassurance, Qatar has pledged to honor its international commitment to host the conference, despite the risks and repercussions. And despite the boycott by key regional states, many of their businesspeople are likely to participate and take advantage of networking opportunities. However, if U.S. officials believed that the multilateral peace process could proceed as though it were insulated from the deadlocked bilateral tracks, that is surely not the case. Economic incentives may reinforce a peace process that is otherwise registering some success, but economics does not appear to have a strong enough appeal to rescue a process that is floundering. Indeed, with virtually all other multilateral initiatives—from the five working groups to the Middle East Development Bank to the Casablanca regional institutions—dormant and suspended, Doha may be the last gasp for one of the most innovative peacemaking ideas to emerge from Madrid.

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R.S.V.P.s to Doha (as of November 11, 1997)

Attending	Not Attending	No Response Yet
<b>Qatar (Hosts)</b>	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	<b>Palestinian Authority (TBA November 14th)</b>
<b>Israel (High-level delegation)</b>	<b>Morocco</b>	
<b>Tunisia</b>	<b>Egypt</b>	

Yemen (Delegation level undecided)	U.A.E.
Jordan (High-level delegation)	Syria (not invited)
Bahrain (Delegation level undecided)	Libya (not invited)
Kuwait (Low-level delegation)	Sudan (not invited)
Oman (Delegation level undecided)	Lebanon (not invited)
	G.C.C. Chambers of Commerce
	The Palestinian Businessmen's Association

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