

Sharm El Sheikh Revisited:

One Year Later

Mar 13, 1997



Brief Analysis

Today's murder of seven Israeli children by an apparently lone and deranged Jordanian soldier-the most recent outrage of Middle Eastern terrorism-ironically coincides with the first anniversary of the extraordinary "Summit of Peacemakers" in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. The summit, which brought together 29 leaders from throughout the Arab world, Turkey, Israel, Europe, Russia, Japan and the United States, had two goals: to support Israel, traumatized at the time by a wave of suicide bombings, and to lay the groundwork for the long-term fight against terrorism. In this context, the summit broke new ground with the Arab countries, Israel and Turkey committing themselves to work together on practical counter-terrorism measures and condemning "all acts of terror." A review of the record, one year later, however, shows that while some of the strategies adopted at the summit have been implemented, many crucial goals still need to be addressed. Significantly, the critical element of pan-Middle Eastern cooperation that was established at Sharm El Sheikh has been largely forgotten, like the summit itself.

Multilateral Meetings: One of Sharm's most important developments was the participants' commitment to translate the summit's principles into practical measures through a series of follow-up multilateral working groups. One follow-up multilateral meeting did convene in Washington, a week after the summit, when participants agreed that terrorism is a crime with no political justification and to work together in the areas of extradition and asylum laws; border controls; forged documents; terrorists' funds; law enforcement information sharing; and counter-terrorism capabilities, with an emphasis on increased counter-terrorism training of Palestinian Authority (PA) personnel. A further follow-up meeting planned for Luxembourg, however, was canceled when the mood among the Arab states soured following Israel's Operation Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon last April. While some informal and bilateral meetings on counter terrorism have taken place, no other multilateral follow up meeting among the Sharm participants has occurred nor has there been any public discussion about resuming the Sharm multilateral meeting framework.

U.S. Efforts: Washington has taken some important steps to translate the Sharm El Sheikh principles into concrete action. The United States appropriated \$100 million to cover the cost of sending advanced counter- terrorism security equipment to Israel. In addition, the United States and Israel signed a counter-terrorism cooperation accord, formed a Joint Counter-Terrorism Group to monitor implementation of the agreement, and established a steering committee headed by the U.S. Secretary of State and the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs to deal with such policy matters. More broadly, the FBI opened numerous offices around the world, including Cairo, Riyadh and Tel Aviv, that should strengthen cooperation and coordination in the fight against terrorism. The United States also enacted important pieces of legislation last year, namely the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act, to deter state sponsors of terrorism.

However, by January 1997, the U.S. informed Israel that bureaucratic and commercial problems are threatening the speedy disbursement of the balance of the \$100 million in anti-terrorism funding because Israel had only signed

contracts for \$15 million, with an addition \$18 million in the planning stages. In the area of sanctions, the United States has taken no punitive action to enforce the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996, which imposes sanctions on third parties who invest in Iran and/or Libya's petroleum resources, even though French, Turkish, Malaysian and possibly other companies and state agencies have put together important energy deals with Iran that appear to trigger the 1996 sanctions. In August, the Administration issued regulations to the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 that allow U.S. financial transactions with two state sponsors of terrorism: Syria and Sudan. And, the State Department has not yet acted, as stipulated in the 1996 anti- terrorism legislation, to fulfill its obligation to designate foreign terrorist organizations-the trigger for many fundraising and access restrictions for these groups.

The G-7: The G-7 industrialized nations have also taken some important steps in the area of counter- terrorism in the past year. In accordance with their pledges at Sharm El Sheikh, the G-7 and Europe have provided police training and development assistance to the Palestinian Authority. In July, the G-7 held a Ministerial Conference on Terrorism in Paris. There, the member states agreed on 25 principles to combat- terrorism. However, their utility in fighting terrorism in the Middle East is limited by the absence of Israeli, Arab and Turkish representatives. Moreover, most of the G-7 and European countries have done little else to translate these principles into practical action, evidenced, for example, by their failure to modify the policy of "critical dialogue" with Iran in response to the renewed threat against Salman Rushdie issued by Tehran just last month.

The Regional Arena: Counter-terrorism has also been a topic on the inter-Arab agenda. Arab Interior Ministers most recently met in Tunis, in January, where they unanimously adopted a "common strategy to combat terrorism" and agreed to a "code of ethics wherein Arab countries commit themselves to combat terrorism and abstain from participating or engaging in terrorist actions and offer asylum to the perpetrators of such acts." As a key element of their strategy, the Arab Interior Ministers decided to submit a draft anti-terrorism law to the Arab Justice Ministers for approval and called for increased counter-terrorism cooperation among Arabs with a working group formed to implement these measures. The ministers also agreed to expand the Arab Center for Security Studies (opened as a counter-terrorism resource center a few months after Sharm El Sheikh) into an academy to be based in Saudi Arabia. Several countries in the region have also signed bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation agreements.

While these steps may show that some Arab countries are making some tentative progress toward counter-terrorism cooperation, most rhetorical promises remain unfulfilled. One major problem with these Arab efforts is that they are being discussed in an exclusively Arab arena (without Israel or Turkey) or, as one Arab newspaper described, "in contrast" to the Sharm El Sheikh model which included cooperation with Israel and recognized Israel as a victim of terrorism. An example of this "contrast" was the presence of the "rogue" and "semi-rogue" Arab states-Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Syria-at the Arab Interior Ministers meeting, all of whom were absent from the Sharm El Sheikh Summit and remain on the State Department's list of state-sponsors of terrorism. Their presence at the Arab Interior Ministers meeting clearly reflected a departure from Sharm, particularly on the issue of defining terrorism. At Sharm, the participants "reemphasize[d] their strong condemnation of all acts of terror in all its abhorrent forms, whatever its motivations, and whoever its perpetrators, including the recent attacks in Israel. . . ." However, in Tunis, the Arab Interior Ministers agreed to a new definition of terrorism that specifically allows for the "legitimate struggle of peoples under foreign occupation," which many Arab commentators interpreted as excusing terrorism aimed at Israel. In so doing, they legitimized such behavior as Syrian support to Hezbollah and other anti-Israel (and anti-peace) terrorist groups.

In addition, the Palestinian Authority has taken some steps unilaterally and with Israel since Sharm to counter terrorism. According to the Palestinian Preventive Security Service, the PA has moved against Hamas control of mosques, schools and universities; arrested Islamic and other militants; and stemmed the flow of money to Hamas.

However, the PA has not undertaken any systematic effort to confiscate illegal weapons, has not transferred suspected terrorists to Israel, has not arrested a leading figure in the military wing of Hamas, Mohammed Dayf, and has already released most of the those arrested shortly after the suicide bombings in Israel last year. According to Reuters, just this week Arafat personally ordered the release of the head of the Hamas "secret apparatus," arrested just after the wave of bombings last year.

Conclusion: Last year's Sharm El Sheikh Summit was meant to mark the beginning of an important process of international and pan-Middle Eastern cooperation to fight terrorism. Yet, a year later, important steps agreed upon at Sharm have not been translated into action. Moreover, the spirit of Sharm has itself become just a memory as there has been a virtual abandonment of the need for an all-inclusive Middle East approach that includes Arabs, Israelis and Turks working together to combat terrorism. As a principal architect of the summit, Washington should resume the process it started a year ago, lest Sharm's legacy be solely a public relations event that its detractors claim it to have been.

Hillary Mann, an attorney and former aide on the staff of the National Security Council, is an associate fellow of The Washington Institute, focusing on U.S. counter-terrorism policy.

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