

# The Arab Summit: Syria's Qualified Success

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## Brief Analysis

In its first summit in nearly six years -- and first since the Madrid process began -- the Arab League responded to the election of Binyamin Netanyahu by laying down firm peace process markers for Israel and, implicitly, the Clinton Administration. While calling for a resumption of negotiations on all tracks, the summit communique presents a toughly-worded set of requisites for peace that -- perhaps like the Likud government's own policy guidelines -- are probably intended more as a tough bargaining position than as a set of non-negotiable demands. Syria was primarily responsible for the hard-nosed tone of the communique, but Damascus failed to accomplish its primary goal of rolling back or at least freezing normalization with Israel.

The Communique. The Arab-Israeli portion of the Cairo Summit's communique is a stronger version of a statement issued June 8 after a Damascus mini-summit of leaders of the three states most influential in Arab world politics: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. As such, the Summit communique puts forth an uncompromising package of final-status demands that far exceed the "242/338, comprehensive peace" parameters of the Madrid conference, e.g., complete withdrawal from the Golan to the line of June 4, 1967; complete "and unconditional" withdrawal from south Lebanon and "the western Bekaa"; and withdrawal from "all occupied Arab land, including East Jerusalem," so that Palestinians can "exercise their right to self-determination and set up an independent Palestinian state with Arab Jerusalem as its capital."

The Cairo communique also goes well beyond the focus of the Damascus communique in key respects, condemning Israeli settlements as "illegitimate" and demanding their removal, "especially (from) Jerusalem"; insisting the Palestinian refugee problem must be solved on the basis of "the right of return, international legitimacy and the relevant United Nations resolutions"; and calling for "balanced and equal security" in the region, an unclear formulation that suggests a tempering of Israeli military might. Issuing an implicit threat against the process of Arab world normalization with Israel, the Arab leaders warn that "if Israel deviates from the bases or principles of the peace process, or retreats from its commitments...or procrastinates...this will lead to...a resumption of tension in the region and compel all the Arab states to reconsider steps taken in the context of the peace process vis-a-vis Israel." Seven Arab League members currently have formal bilateral relations with Israel; thirteen, plus the PLO, participate in multilateral negotiations.

Syria: Less Than a Knockout. The communique adopted Syria's most precious peace process positions on the Golan and Lebanon, but a close reading nevertheless shows that Damascus failed to achieve several of its key goals and actually was an implicit target of criticism on terrorism. Assad's primary goal-- a rollback, or at least freeze, of Arab normalization with Israel -- apparently never got out of the starting gate. But the Syrians failed even to win an unambiguous threat of anti-normalization measures if Israel fails Arab peace process tests. Instead, the vaguely worded warning to "reconsider steps taken in the context of the peace process vis-a-vis Israel" would not deter any state determined to pursue normalization; moreover, it amounts to an implicit and unwelcome (from Syria's viewpoint) Arab League legitimization of the normalization that has taken place so far.

> The Syrians also fell short of their goals in other ways.

- Terrorism. Although past Arab summits have condemned terrorism, the more elaborate formulation in this communique "condemn(ing) all forms of terrorism and acts of sabotage and disruption designed to destabilize a number of states, including Arab states" -- seemed to point the finger directly at Syria, reflecting in almost precise words some of the charges Jordan has leveled at its northern neighbor in recent weeks.
- Turkey. Syria was hoping to achieve condemnation of Ankara on three scores: its military cooperation agreement with Israel, its Euphrates water policies, and its alleged concentration of troops on the Syrian border. The summit took up only the first and even on that point limited itself to expressing mildly-worded "concern" and urging Ankara "to reconsider this agreement, in a way to prevent any negative bearing on the security of Arab states" -- an ambiguous formulation that met with Ankara's public approval.
- Palestinians. The communique labels the Palestinian question "the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict" -- a longstanding Arab position, but one that did not appear in the Damascus communique and probably one not welcomed by Damascus, which has seen its bargaining position erode as other tracks have received Israeli priority.
- Assad's meetings with Arafat and King Hussein, whose peace process policies the Syrian leader considers traitorous. Engineered by Egypt, the encounters were part of the price Damascus had to pay for the summit.
- Iran. The Syrian ally was singled out twice for strong criticism -- once for an implicit charge of supporting "sabotage" in Bahrain and once for its occupation of islands of the United Arab Emirates.

The Box Score. Among other regional players, Egypt scored a clear success in bringing about a summit that -- at least with its public face if not behind closed doors -projected more than a semblance of unity. Determined to "spin" the summit as a statement of support for the peace process -- President Mubarak subsequently told CNN he is "very optimistic (about the peace process), even with Mr. Netanyahu" -- Cairo could crow that, for the first time every Arab state (except Iraq, which was not invited) had endorsed such peace process staples as Madrid, UN Resolutions 242 and 338, and peace as "a strategic option." (Libya was handsomely rewarded for this seeming sea-change in its peace process policy: The summit branded the Lockerbie-related UN Security Council resolutions "arbitrary" and issued a potentially sanctions-busting threat "to consider possible ways to spare the Libyan people further harm" if sanctions continue.)

Jordan did not achieve its aim of a bland, non-threatening summit but established itself as a self-confident player with which to be reckoned in Arab councils, far from the isolated object of scorn some Arab nationalists had predicted it would be. The Palestinians received re-affirmation of their issue as the "core" of the Arab-Israeli conflict as well as collective Arab backing for their positions on final status issues with Israel. Perhaps their only disappointment was the failure of the Summit to call for withdrawal from Hebron or implementation specifically of other Israeli commitments in Oslo II; that would probably have been more acknowledgement of the Oslo agreements than Damascus was willing to grant. (Indeed, in deference to Syria, the Oslo agreements were not explicitly mentioned.)

Impact on Peace-Making. Through its summitry, the Arab states have surprised and won the attention of the fledgling Netanyahu government and increased pressure on it to prove its moderation. However, the history of Arab summits, Syria's dwindling (if still significant) influence over Arab behavior, and the abiding divisions within the Arab world create skepticism about the effect the summit is likely to have on actual Arab state policies, particularly regarding normalization with Israel. If Netanyahu and the Arab states follow up on their stated commitments to respect past agreements and resume negotiations -- setting aside rhetorical flourishes -- then the image of Arab unity is likely to fade in favor of a general Arab trend to pursue ties with Israel according to national self-interest.

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