

Summit Finds Arabs More Divided Than United

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Brief Analysis

In the first Middle East summit since August 1990, Arab leaders are meeting in Cairo to try to forge a unified Arab stance towards the peace process. However, just as the last Arab gathering six years ago ended in acrimony after Iraq's aggression against Kuwait, the current meeting also seems destined to accent Arab differences rather than Arab unity.

Each of the key Arab parties seeks a different outcome from the summit -- ranging from Jordan, which prefers a bland communique, to Syria, which hopes to forge a consensus to roll back Arab world normalization with Israel and even re-impose the deeply eroded Arab boycott. This summit is likely to set down toughly-worded markers for the Netanyahu government on requirements for a comprehensive peace. But it is doubtful that Egypt, the summit host, will allow Syria's "roll-back" efforts to carry the day. And -- in view of the increasingly common pattern of Arab states' dealing with Israel on the basis of national interests -- it is also doubtful that any communique that emerges will be a useful barometer of future Arab behavior. Indeed, the relatively sparse summit attendance expected by moderate Arab heads of state is a sign that the "normalizers" are distancing themselves from an anticipated hard-line result.

Differing aims. The widest gap between the parties is that between Syria and Jordan. Damascus hopes to exploit Arab concern about the Likud government by achieving a long-sought halt to Arab world normalization with Israel that Damascus feels (correctly) has eroded its bargaining position. Jordan, which is not displeased with the Likud victory and probably wishes there were no summit, wants to prevent a communique that constrains its pursuit of close ties with Israel. In the middle is the PLO, which has little desire to boost Syria's position, but which would like to see the summit support longstanding Arab positions on Palestinian issues such as independent statehood and Jerusalem.

Egypt sees the Netanyahu election and the Cairo summit both in terms of regional political opportunities and the peace process. First, Egypt hopes to use the summit to affirm and strengthen its leadership position in the Arab world. The Egyptians were the driving force and common element in three recent Arab mini-summits -- Mubarak-Assad in Cairo on June 3, Mubarak-Hussein-Arafat in Aqaba, Jordan on June 5, and Mubarak-Assad-Abdullah (Saudi Arabia) in Damascus on June 8. These meetings, called in the wake of the Netanyahu election, culminated in the June 8 announcement of this weekend's summit. A second Egyptian goal this weekend is to gain in its self-perceived regional rivalry with Israel. To that end, Cairo is willing to insist the summit demand that Israel sign the Nuclear

Non-Proliferation Treaty and open its Dimona reactor to international inspection. And, while Egypt will not back Syrian efforts to roll-back normalization, it may seek ways to halt further normalization, as it has at other times in recent years, pending further progress on the peace process. Third, Cairo genuinely wants to keep the peace process on track so that it can keep its relations with both Washington and the Arab world in balance, as well as for reasons of regional stability.

The mini-summits. Despite Egypt's presence at the "pre-summit summits," a close reading of the communiqués from the Aqaba and Damascus meetings reveals some of the differences, in tone and substance, between the Jordanian and Syrian approaches to the peace process. The statement from the Aqaba gathering (attended by the leaders of Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinians) was relatively moderate and straightforward. Although containing elements such as a demand for "comprehensive peace" and "withdrawal from all occupied Arab lands" not to Likud's liking, it resisted harsh rhetoric, omitted direct reference to Palestinian statehood (in favor of "legitimate national rights"), and limited its comment on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks to a call for a "redoubling [of] efforts to resume the negotiations" -- a strikingly neutral formulation, particularly in view of President Assad's statement two days earlier in Cairo that "resumption of negotiations is not [now] on the agenda."

In contrast, the communiqué issued after the Syrian-Egyptian-Saudi parley in Damascus on June 8 drives a harder bargain on both the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian tracks and warns Israel against "returning the region to the whirlpool of tension and violence," for which Israel will be entirely responsible. The trilateral communiqué adopted specifically Syrian language in demanding withdrawal from the Golan to the de facto cease-fire line of June 4, 1967 -- a Syrian interpretation of "full withdrawal" that would put Syria on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, an outcome objectionable even to most dovish Israelis.

The challenge for Egypt. In seeking to forge Arab world unity, rather than display divisions, Egypt faces a stiff test. It will be difficult for Mubarak to bridge the Syrian-Jordanian gap. Moreover, the Syrian-Jordanian dispute now goes well beyond differences over peace process tactics. Damascus regularly launches scathing attacks on Jordan in the press -- accusing it, for example, of giving Israel the impression that the Arabs are prepared to accept the idea of "a Greater Israel." Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass reportedly said recently that Jordan was an imperialist creation intended to shield Israel from the Arab world. Damascus also suspects Amman of trying to help create a pro-Western, post-Saddam Iraq that would leave Syria surrounded by an Israeli-Jordanian-Iraqi-Turkish enemy bloc. For its part, Jordan is convinced that Damascus is behind recent cross-border terrorist infiltrations, as strongly implied in recent statements by King Hussein. The king went on to say that terrorism-supporting states should be subjected to international sanctions. Damascus now is reportedly concerned that Jordan will put it on the defensive at the summit by raising the terrorism issue and, in concert with some Gulf states, insisting that it clarify the goals of its alliance with Iran.

In addition to Jordanian-Syrian problems, other inter-Arab divisions are likely to be aired in Cairo as well. Iraq was disinvited, for obvious reasons, at Saudi insistence. Egypt, in response to the Mubarak assassination attempt and Nile water issues, was inclined not to invite Sudan but was dissuaded. (In one reported show of pique, the Egyptians have housed the Sudanese delegation in a hotel far from the summit site.) The probable presence of Muammar Qadhafi (and Sudanese leader Omar Hasan al-Bashir) creates possibilities for all kinds of unexpected trouble. Moreover, attendance reportedly will be relatively sparse, with only about a dozen heads of state out of twenty-two Arab League members planning to attend. Most of the non-attendees are Gulf and North African states that have some formal ties with Israel.

Conclusion. As with past summits, any communiqué from Cairo is likely to reflect the lowest common denominator of Arab politics and adopt a position closer to Syria's than Jordan's. Syria's influence in the Arab world, although waning, is still considerable, enhanced by its closeness with the Saudis; at any rate, it is greater than Jordan's. With

Syria's more extreme demands nevertheless kept in check by Egypt, the summit will probably take a firm line on peace process issues but stop short of freezing normalization with Israel. But whatever the outcome of the communique, discussions behind closed doors -- and post-summit behavior -- are likely to reflect the real divisions that continue to color inter-Arab politics, nearly six years after Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent start of Middle East peacemaking in Madrid.

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