

Arab Reaction to Rabin's Assassination

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Brief Analysis

As Israelis mourn the death of Yitzhak Rabin and contemplate the renewal of a peace process that has divided their nation, Arab states and leaders will play a critical role in shaping Israel's decision. Nothing so persuades Israelis of the merits of risk-taking for peace than visible signs of Arab acceptance, as exemplified by Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem eighteen years ago this month.

Attendees

Of the reported 2,500 foreign guests at yesterday's funeral, none drew more politically focused attention than the Arab delegations. At least six Arab states reportedly were represented: Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, and Qatar. The first two, Israel's treaty partners, were the only ones represented at the head-of-state level. Of the others, each represented by cabinet ministers (Morocco by its prime minister), only Morocco has diplomatic relations with Israel, albeit at a low-level. Yasser Arafat obligingly stayed away at the request of Israeli security authorities, but other top officials of the Palestinian Authority were present.

Although it may seem inappropriate to think in terms of "funeral politics," Israelis undoubtedly viewed Arab attendance -- and other aspects of the Arab reaction to Rabin's death -- as measures of the success of Rabin's peace policies. By that standard, it was a strong tribute to Rabin; it is clear that none of the Arab delegations, with the exception of Egypt, would have been present in Israel had it not been for Rabin's accomplishments. The "stars," those whose presence and statements probably most touched Israelis, were King Hussein and the two Gulf delegations. Hussein's emotional speech, his (and Queen Noor's) tears, and his reference to Yitzhak and Leah Rabin as "my brother" and "my sister" (appellations that Muslims usually reserve for one another) only further convinced Israelis of his humanity, dedication to peace, and ability to overcome the past. By contrast with King Hussein's performance, President Mubarak's speech -- dignified and eloquent -- seemed somewhat distant and formal, particularly since he has waited fourteen years as president to come to visit and even three years since accepting an invitation from Rabin.

In addition to Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco, Israel has contacts with nearly a dozen other Arab states (three in North Africa, seven in the Arabian peninsula) that participate in multilateral negotiations over regional issues, a less heralded dimension of the peace process, as well as economic summits like the one recently held last week in Amman. Precisely because they have withheld formal diplomatic recognition from Israel, participation in the funeral

by these states would have been a powerful statement of acceptance. With their presence, Oman and Qatar, who have already established bilateral economic links, effectively told Israelis that lack of recognition was only a formality, secondary in importance to consoling a nation upon the loss of its leader. Senior-level Moroccan presence also made a positive impact. Attendance by Mauritania, less popularly identified with the Arab world, was surely appreciated but without the impact other Arab states would create. All the Arab parties present issued strong statements of condolence; particularly warm were Arafat's and Moroccan King Hassan's, both of which referred to Rabin in personal terms as a "friend." Unfortunately, others of Israel's multilateral partners did not follow suit.

The Missing

The two most glaring absences were those of Syria and Saudi Arabia. (Lebanon, as usual following Syria's lead, also stayed away.) Nobody expected Syria to send a representative, and many Israelis no doubt reacted skeptically to the testimony of a U.S. official that President Assad had condemned the assassination in a private telephone conversation. For its public part, Assad and the Syrian government were mum. The Syrian press reported the assassination, urged that it not slow the peace process, reminded that "the ball is in Israel's court," and acerbically noted "bitter irony in the fact that Rabin,...who ordered many assassinations, was himself a victim of the same terror he was sponsoring."

Probably the Arab state that could have done the most by its presence to buoy Israeli spirits, underscore Israel's acceptance in the Middle East, and strengthen Israel's peace process commitment is Saudi Arabia, vastly influential in the Gulf and wider Arab and Islamic world. However, no Saudi representative attended the funeral and Riyadh issued no official comment. There was a hint of U.S. disappointment in White House spokesman Michael McCurry's statement, in response to a reporter's question, that Washington had not expected a Saudi "high-level representative" to attend the funeral. (While a low-level representative would have been inappropriate, a cabinet minister or an ambassador posted to a neighboring Arab country would have been neither "high-level" nor inappropriate.)

Of Israel's other peace process partners in the multilaterals, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates -- the former with more passion -- condemned the killing and urged that the peace process go forward. Aside from Oman and Qatar, the other Gulf states -- Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia -- fell back on a reported GCC statement that regretted the assassination. Arab League Secretary-General Esmat Abdel-Meguid called neutrally for continuation of the peace process.

The Scornful

Among Arab states, the ugliest notes were sounded by Libya, which called Rabin "a terrorist," and Lebanon, where Defense Minister Muhsin Dallul dismissed the killing by saying that all Israeli leaders are "warmongers." Beirut, like Damascus, did not issue a government statement. The closest thing to an official reaction from Iraq was the terse official news report that "the prime minister of the Zionist enemy" was murdered.

Unofficial Reaction

If the official Arab reaction contained some positive elements, some disappointing ones, and some predictably negative ones, there were several unofficial statements and images that reminded Israelis of just how deeply popular hatred runs in some quarters. Terrorist groups were happy, of course, although Ahmad Jibril lamented (perhaps not sarcastically) that Rabin was killed by a Jew, not a Palestinian. Hamas said it "congratulates" Palestinians for "the death of one of their worst enemies, a criminal." Perhaps the most ghoulish image was the photograph of Amman-based Hamas spokesman Ibrahim Ghosheh displaying a copy of The Jordan Times headlined "Rabin Assassinated" while grinning broadly.

The reaction of the Arab world press was captured well by The Mideast Mirror, which titled its press review article

"Few Tears for Rabin." Among the prominent themes in the Arab press: relief that the world would now see that Jews can be as extremist, fratricidal, and terrorist as Arabs; moral linkage of Rabin's death with the recent murder, presumably by Israelis, of Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Fathi Shqaqi; Rabin's role as the intifada "bone-crusher"; and a belittling of the accomplishments of the peace process with which Rabin is identified. A few Arab commentators fretted about the implications of Rabin's demise for the peace process, and fewer still praised his efforts at reconciliation with the Palestinians and wider Arab world. One rare writer, in the London-based al-Hayat was wise enough to point out that an Arab display of sympathy for Rabin would help the peace process. In Gaza, Arafat banned dissemination of news about rejoicing over Rabin's death (of which the Hamas statement was, in fact, an unusual example).

For his part, Acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres has signalled in his eulogy and in interviews that he intends to move forward with the peace process rather than pause to heal the deep divisions that process has brought to Israeli society. If he and other peace process supporters are to succeed in keeping Israel on the track laid out by Yitzhak Rabin in the months and years ahead, visible signs of Arab acceptance, recognition, and support for Israel will be crucial. Funeral attendance and the general Arab reaction to the assassination thus far temper optimism that those signs will be forthcoming.

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