

The Tunisia Arab Summit and the Road to Greater Middle East Reform

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Brief Analysis

On March 29, Arab heads of state will convene in Tunis for the sixteenth summit of the twenty-two-member Arab League. The two days of discussion and the summit's final communique will provide some indication of the seriousness with which Arab leaders intend to tackle the issue of internal reform.

Background on the Greater Middle East Initiative

Since the September 11 attacks, Washington has widely come to accept that internal reform in the Middle East is requisite to U.S. national security. In this regard, the Bush administration has devised a "Greater Middle East Initiative" to support political, economic, and educational reform throughout the region. On February 13, a working document for this initiative (which policymakers had hoped would serve as the starting point for a June G-8 Summit statement) was leaked to al-Hayat, a pan-Arab daily newspaper, and stirred sharp criticism throughout the Arab world. Arab leaders -- particularly in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria -- argued that the initiative was neoimperialist, that reform had to come from within, and that the Arab-Israeli conflict remained at the heart of the problems faced by the Arab world.

Although the proposed U.S. plan did have shortcomings (see [PolicyWatch no. 836 \(templateC05.php?CID=1714\)](#)), the leak of the working paper prior to consulting with Arab leaders ensured Arab opposition. In the wake of U.S. undersecretary of state Marc Grossman's early March trip to the region to clarify the U.S. position on the initiative with selected leaders, the administration has taken a public step backward from the document.

Reform Records

Although internally driven reform does hold the best chance for long-term success, it is unlikely that such reform will occur to any great extent if the political leaders of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria are to lead the way. While some Arab heads of state may welcome economic reform, political reform will challenge the grips on power held by many leaders. Consider the recent reform records of these Arab countries:

Saudi Arabia. On March 16, authorities arrested a number of prominent Saudi human rights and democracy activists who were prepared to call for an independent human rights association (an official human rights body had been announced days before). Leading up to these arrests, Saudi interior minister Prince Nayef met with several of the activists to discuss their signing of a petition calling for a constitutional monarchy. The interior minister threatened them with imprisonment in the context of asking that they sign an agreement not to support any "new reformist-oriented petitions."

Egypt. Human rights abuses remain a serious problem in Egypt. A February 2004 Human Rights Watch report cited four Egyptian cases of "deaths in custody" in September-November 2003, with at least seventeen such deaths in 2002 and 2003 combined. Egyptians have lived under emergency law since 1981, the entire reign of President Hosni Mubarak. The regime's stance on homegrown reform is equally clear from legislation requiring all nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register with the Social Affairs Ministry. This ministry can reject any organization's

registration, as it did with the New Women's Research Center, a perceived threat to Egyptian stability.

Syria. On March 8, a small gathering of human rights activists attempted to deliver a petition to parliament protesting forty-one years of emergency law. Security forces disbanded the protesters' sit-in and reportedly arrested thirty activists. Over the past two weeks, the Syrian regime has quashed Kurdish protests in several small northern towns; reports reveal that security forces killed tens of protesters, injured hundreds, and arrested more than two thousand. Such protests stem from the regime's ongoing denial of Syrian Kurdish rights. Roughly 200,000 Kurds are deprived of Syrian nationality and cannot own property, work in the public sector, or study at state schools.

These examples clearly illustrate the positions of certain Arab regimes on reform. In other cases, regimes issue strong public statements endorsing reform, but have little intention of putting such words into practice. For instance, on March 12-14, President Mubarak, Egyptian government officials, and selected NGO leaders participated in a three-day conference on reform at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt. While this conference was a modest step forward, producing a promising civil-society declaration on Arab reform (see [PolicyWatch no. 845 \(templateC05.php?CID=172\)](#)), such events must also be judged by their context. For example, with the exception of President Mubarak's televised opening address, the entire conference was closed to all media. Key NGO figures were either not invited, invited at the last minute, or chose not to attend because the conference would be comprised mostly of former cabinet ministers and ruling party officials.

Pre-Summit Expectations

The best that can be expected from Monday's Arab Summit in Tunisia is a broad statement of principles endorsing some reforms, along the lines of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina statement. Although certain Arab leaders will always resist opportunities for real change, such statements are valuable both for the purposes of international accountability, and for the openings they can create for regional civil-society leaders.

Yet, the issuance of a broad Arab Summit statement supporting reform is by no means certain. Earlier this month, Arab foreign ministers met in Cairo to set the agenda for the upcoming summit. On March 11, al-Hayat published the final communique of those sessions, which recommended postponing reform implementation until a designated committee -- reporting back to the 2005 Arab Summit in Algeria -- determines the proper mechanism for executing those reforms. The Cairo communique emphasized achieving a "complete and just peace in the region," supporting the United Arab Emirates' right to three Iranian-occupied islands, and promoting intra-Arab cooperation before working toward societal reform.

The Yassin Factor

Prospects for a Tunisia summit on reform are further complicated by Monday's assassination of Shaykh Ahmed Yassin, the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas. With protests erupting across the Arab world, Shaykh al-Azhar al-Tantawi's religious pronouncement endorsing revenge, and the retaliation that will likely ensue in the days ahead, the Arab world will remain focused on the Palestinian struggle in the near term. Yassin's assassination gives Arab leaders an excuse for inaction and a temporary shield against American pressure. Indeed, the summit's final communique might contain nothing more than anti-American and anti-Israeli vitriol.

It will be interesting to observe which Arab leaders will use the summit only to criticize Israel and the United States, and which will push for movement on issues like economic reform and women's empowerment. These reforms would not directly threaten the stability of their regimes and would provide their societies with tangible gains. In particular, it will be interesting to see what stance is taken by those leaders with whom President George W. Bush is meeting, especially Tunisian president Zin al-Abidin Ben Ali, who visited Washington in February, and Egyptian president Mubarak, who will travel to Bush's Texas ranch in April.

Washington's Strategy

The Bush administration should continue to delink the Arab-Israeli conflict and the issue of Greater Middle East reform. This decoupling will prevent Israeli and Palestinian violence from holding critical human-development reform and bilateral relationships hostage. For example, tying reform of the Tunisian press or the U.S.-Bahrain relationship to the day-to-day violence of the Arab-Israeli conflict does not serve the interests of Tunisia, Bahrain, or the United States.

At the same time, American policymakers cannot assume that even the most sympathetic Arab reformers will persist in their efforts unaffected by headlines of ongoing bloodshed between Israelis and Palestinians. Pursuing Arab reform may not be contingent on Arab-Israeli peace, but it is certainly aided by serious efforts to promote that goal. Active U.S. attempts to resuscitate Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy will have a positive spillover effect for reformers in the Arab world.

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