

# Reading between the Lines of the Sharm al-Shaykh Summit

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Brief Analysis

**A**t yesterday's Sharm al-Shaykh summit, President George W. Bush persisted in his post-September 11 campaign to transform the Middle Eastern landscape, an effort that includes not only promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace but transforming intra-Arab politics as well. A close reading of the carefully crafted statements by Bush and his Egyptian host, President Hosni Mubarak, offers a revealing look into where U.S. and Arab leaders agree, disagree, and choose to remain ambiguous on critical issues facing the region.

### On Israeli-Palestinian Peace

On this theme, Bush evinced unprecedented passion, building on past expressions of commitment that, to their error, few observers took seriously. Interestingly, in his Sharm address, he made no specific mention of the Roadmap or its Quartet drafters, referring only to his June 24, 2002, address and the various sets of Arab, Palestinian, and Israeli responsibilities that emerge from that speech. In contrast, Mubarak, speaking on behalf of the five Arab leaders present, spent considerable time focusing on the Roadmap and other textual bases for peacemaking (e.g., UN Security Council resolutions; the Saudi initiative). The irony of these statements, especially given the decades-old Arab complaint about U.S. policy, was that Bush appeared more interested in achieving progress and reaching an outcome while the Arabs seemed more interested in operating within a rigid and defined process.

### On New Palestinian Leadership

U.S. diplomats succeeded, to a certain extent, in winning support for further sidelining of Yasir Arafat. Although Arab leaders did not specifically repudiate Arafat, Mubarak did make a specific reference in his declaration to "the determination of the Palestinian Authority to fulfill its responsibilities . . . as announced by Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas." In Arab circles, the very fact that Abbas was treated as a summit equal itself provided a major boost to his stature.

### On Fighting Terrorism

Arab leaders delivered an important statement condemning "the culture of extremism and violence in any form or shape, from whatever source or place, regardless of justifications or motives." This was backed up by two specific commitments: to use "all the power of the law to prevent support reaching illegal organizations including terrorist

groups" and to ensure that all Arab financial assistance is transmitted directly to the Palestinian Authority (PA), not to shadowy nongovernmental organizations, including religious or charitable associations, that could be terrorist front groups. Ambiguity remains, however, on the definition of "illegal organizations." Hamas, for example, is a terrorist group by U.S. and Israeli statute but not by Egyptian or Palestinian law. Moreover, the flow of Arab aid must go through the PA Ministry of Finance, not through the office of the PA chairman (i.e., Arafat) -- another loophole that needs closing. In addition, Washington needs to take steps of its own to ensure that Arabs have no excuse to circumvent the PA. Given that U.S. law now requires U.S. assistance to be funneled through autonomous groups outside PA control, the White House will need to work with Congress to bring U.S. policy in line with what has been demanded of the Arabs. For his part, Bush made a significant statement that could be interpreted as rejecting the notion that a Hamas/Palestinian Islamic Jihad ceasefire would itself constitute a major step forward: "We seek true peace, not just a pause between more wars and intifadas."

#### On Arab Responsibility for Peace

In his opening comments, Bush delivered an implicit but powerful challenge to Arab rulers, especially Mubarak, by recalling Anwar Sadat as a "leader for peace who had the vision to see opportunities and a bold heart to seize them." Then, rather than praise Mubarak as a man who has followed in that tradition and has faced assassination attempts of his own, Bush said instead, "This spirit we need today," suggesting that such leadership remains to be shown. To his credit, Bush performed the diplomatic equivalent of throwing down the gauntlet to his host and the other Arab leaders.

#### On Iraq

Bush and Mubarak, in their separate statements, offered complementary but not identical visions of Iraq. Bush spoke of America's responsibility to rebuild Iraq and expressed the "hope" that Arab leaders will "contribute" to that effort. In contrast, Mubarak repeated the pattern of his remarks on the peace process, speaking about the relevant UN resolution on Iraq. In addition, he said only that Arab leaders "reiterate our support for the Iraqi people," offering no specific commitment to assist in the reconstruction effort. The implication is that Arab leaders will let Washington succeed or fail in Iraq on its own.

#### On Change within the Arab World

Bush also pressed his theme of the need for change within Arab societies, calling on Arabs to implement both political and economic reforms. The former, he said, include permitting "expression of different views and broader political participation"; the latter include opening markets and building a U.S.-Middle East Free Trade Area. Here, too, Bush delivered a potentially ominous message: "All Middle Eastern countries that travel this challenging path will have the support and the friendship of the United States," suggesting that a different fate could befall those that choose a different path. On this point, in contrast to his comments on the peace process, Bush did not refer to any common agreement with his Arab interlocutors, nor did he praise any of them for reformist measures that each, to varying degrees, have taken in recent months. That Bush did not congratulate them for steps already taken -- as he did in his recent American Enterprise Institute address, which included complimentary words for Saudi reform initiatives -- was important because such praise would surely have been interpreted locally as a sign that Bush was satisfied with what had been accomplished and ready to move on to other matters.

The sensitivity of this issue was evident in Mubarak's own comments on behalf of the Arab leaders. He limited his remarks to "welcoming" U.S. efforts to "open new economic initiatives" in the region, implying that Washington has no business in the political reform arena. Indeed, whereas Bush closed his declaration with a call for domestic political change in Arab countries, Mubarak closed his opening remarks with a call for a Middle East free from the "threat of terrorism or the dangers of mass destruction." That contrast is a hint of where the U.S.-Arab debate could

turn in coming months, with Arabs trying to appeal to Bush's security concerns so as to change the topic from Bush's interest in Arab liberalization.

## On Democracy

Interestingly, in what was most likely a "first" for U.S.-Arab summitry, both Bush and Mubarak used the word "democracy" in their remarks, though neither employed it in the context of wider Arab politics. Mubarak referred to the importance of consolidating "democratic and accountable institutions" within the PA, language born of Bush's June 24 address. For his part, Bush referred to U.S. efforts in helping Iraqis "achieve freedom and democracy in a unified country" and to how Arab leaders "recognize the importance of representative, democratic institutions . . . for the Iraqi and Palestinian peoples." When it came to their verbal jousting over Arab politics, however, neither leader mentioned democracy.

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