

The Arab League Summit: Opportunities amid the Vitriol?

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Brief Analysis

In the Middle East, this week witnessed a series of events occurring at such breakneck speed that it is important not to lose the significance of each:

- On Thursday, President Bush issued an unprecedented statement calling on Chairman Yasir Arafat to "stop the violence," a statement that could lay down a marker by which the administration judges the efforts of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and which could determine the direction of the U.S.–Palestinian relationship under the new administration.
- On Wednesday, Israel's national unity government launched retaliatory attacks against Arafat's personal guard, Force 17, underscoring Israel's intent to hold the chairman personally responsible for the terrorism emanating from within his close circle.
- On Monday and Tuesday, bombs went off inside the heart of Israel — responsibility for which was claimed by the Iranian-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad, suggesting that Tehran is eager to tap pro-Hizbullah sympathy and compete with the Tanzim and other Fatah elements for the pacesetter's role in the Palestinian uprising.
- Also on Tuesday, the PA chose an all-or-nothing option at the United Nations, demanding a Security Council vote on a resolution that the United States had no trouble vetoing — one calling for an international protection force for Palestinians — rather than pursuing diplomacy to bring to a vote a watered-down, but still problematic, resolution on which Washington was prepared to compromise.
- And on Sunday, Israel's Likud-led government issued a communique affirming its intent to seek the full implementation of signed agreements with the Palestinians, specifically citing its willingness to fulfill the requirement for a third "further redeployment" — territorial withdrawal in the West Bank — in the context of full compliance with the Wye River Memorandum.

Each of these items alone has significant ramifications for the direction of Arab-Israeli relations, the Palestinian uprising, and U.S. policy toward the peace process. Taken together, they suggest a situation in great flux with emerging trends that are both ominous (e.g., Iran's deepening role) and positive (e.g., Bush's forthrightness on

violence, Israel's balance of diplomacy and force).

The Arab Summit Amid all these events was the convening of the Amman summit of the Arab League. In both Washington and the Middle East, there was considerable trepidation at the potential outcome of this event. Among the reasons why Secretary of State Colin Powell traversed the region a month ago was to lobby Arab states on a new approach to Iraq sanctions in advance of the Amman summit, lest the summiteers agree to throw their full support behind Saddam Husayn and to jettison sanctions altogether. Similarly, one of the reasons why Israel withheld military responses to terrorist attacks until the summit's conclusion was, apparently, to avoid enraging the summiteers. Rarely before had an Arab summit received so much attention in advance.

In the end, none of the nightmares about the summit came to pass:

- On Iraq, the clear majority of Arab states refused to endorse Iraq's demand that Arab states should call for an immediate end to UN sanctions without reference to Iraq's need to comply with relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Indeed, the summit conclusion—which de facto left in place all previous summit declarations on the Iraq matter and buried a request that Jordan's King Abdullah continue consultations on the matter in paragraph 25 of the final communique — was an unexpected victory for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (and, by extension, for the United States).
- On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the summit's final communique was — by the low standards of inter-Arab politics — restrained. Compared with the Cairo emergency summit of last October, the Amman summit statement was relatively subdued. Whereas the October communique accused Israel of waging war on the Palestinian people, there is no mention of "war" in the March communique. Whereas the October statement called on Palestinians to shed more blood for their cause because it is a precious asset for the liberation of the land, there was no mention of the benefits of bloodshed in the Amman communique. While the Amman statement includes one phrase saluting the Palestinian "martyrs of the intifada," the more dominant theme is not martyrdom (shuhada) but steadfastness (sumud), a term that implies vigilance, determination, and commitment, but not necessarily violence. The summit also showed financial modesty. Whereas the October event promised \$1 billion in assistance to the Palestinians (\$800 million toward safeguarding Jerusalem's Islamic character and \$200 million toward support of Palestinians themselves) — with virtually none having been delivered — this week's event promised less (\$30 million per month for six months) with a higher likelihood of delivery.

To be sure, the Amman summit was not sparing in its vitriol. It re-endorsed, for example, the call for the UN Security Council to "try Israeli war criminals who have committed massacres and crimes against Arab citizens throughout the Arab occupied territories and elsewhere" — with the last two words undoubtedly intended to conjure up images of Ariel Sharon's Lebanon past. And in its lone new initiative, the summit called for the "reactivation of the Arab boycott of Israel" through the convening of conferences under the auspices of the Damascus-based Arab League boycott office. Even if this is just a cosmetic move that does not bring about reimposition of the secondary and tertiary aspects of the boycott, this step would violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the Egypt-Israel and the Jordan-Israel peace treaties and send the Arab-Israeli relationship back to pre-Madrid days. Perhaps most scandalously, the summit provides a platform for two of the most virulently anti-Semitic speeches delivered on the world stage in the past decade, with the two Ba'thist presidents — Syrian leader Bashar al-Asad ("Israelis are worse than the Nazis") and Iraq's Saddam Husayn ("May God damn the Jews!") — each trying to outdo each other in that category.

Overall, however, the summit provides some unexpected opportunities for the advancement of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Here are four:

- On Iraqi sanctions, the summit exposed Iraq's bull-headed intransigence and the deep-seated fears of Saddam's intentions that animate most Arab leaders. If Saddam had been willing to accept a statement calling on Iraq to

respect "international legitimacy" and UN resolutions, he would have won unanimous Arab support for the immediate lifting of sanctions. Instead, Saddam chose bellicosity over progress, a lesson not lost on any summit participants. This provides the United States with important new leverage on which to build an Iraq policy designed both to tighten sanctions and to hasten the demise of Saddam's regime.

- On Jordan-Iraq relations, a key subtext of the Amman summit was the series of threats — some open, some in code — made by Iraq against the Hashemite rulers in Jordan. In addition to a set of vicious insults lobbed at Jordan by Iraq's foreign minister and vice president, Saddam Husayn also delivered two thinly-veiled threats against Jordan in his speech (delivered by a subordinate): 1) Saddam praised the 1958 Iraqi revolution of the "people and the army" against the "pro-Western regime" of Hashemites, glorifying — in King Abdullah's own presence — the murder of the king's great-great uncle and many other cousins; 2) Saddam called on Arabs to accept the deployment of "seven million volunteers" to Israel's borders to destroy the Jewish state, not-too-subtly implying that those standing in the way will themselves be thrown aside by the "people and the army." The ferocity of Iraqi attacks on Jordan provides an opportunity, now more than ever, for U.S.-led international efforts to wean Jordan away from its reliance on Iraqi oil and trade, thereby further isolating the Saddam regime.

- On the peace process, most observers missed a stunning contradiction between the summit communique and Yasir Arafat's own address to the gathering. In the communique (paragraph 16), the summit called upon Israel to "implement the agreements and obligations made . . . and [called for] the resumption of negotiations on all tracks from where they stopped." That position, effectively asking the Sharon government to begin talks where the Taba/Camp David negotiations ended, is a diplomatic non-starter. However, in his own speech, Arafat pointedly did not make that same demand. Instead, Arafat said he "was truly ready to work . . . to confront violence regardless of its source, within the framework of the immediate return to the negotiating table and the accurate implementation of the clauses of signed agreements, the latest of which is the Sharm al-Shaykh agreement. . . . We see no reason why there should not be immediate action to implement them on the ground." While recognizing that Arafat remains wedded to a strategy of violence-and-negotiation, rather than violence-or-negotiation, his summit speech might reflect what is, for him, a significant step toward the Israeli position, i.e., a willingness to return to incremental steps based on the implementation of past agreements before moving on to new diplomatic initiatives. Whether this is, in fact, his policy remains to be tested in the context of an end to violence.

- On U.S.-Arab relations, the lower decibel level of the summit's communique almost surely reflects the fear of many Arab leaders that they had unwittingly let the pan-Arabist genie out of the bottle with their rhetoric-run-amok in October, with the result that their own unfulfilled promises came back to haunt them in terms of heightened popular disaffection back home. If Arab leaders truly recognize that their verbiage can have negative repercussions for their own domestic stability, if not for the temperature of Arab-Israeli relations, then this may open opportunities for Washington both to address the problem of incitement on a regional basis, and to demand wider Arab support in leaning on Arafat to end violence as the price of greater U.S. efforts to de-escalate a crisis — one that has the potential for biting Arab leaders where it really hurts, i.e., in their own backyard.

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