

# The Arab Summit Communiqué:

## What Passes for Moderation...

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Oct 23, 2000

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### Brief Analysis

**A**rab heads-of-state meeting this weekend added one more nail in the coffin of the Arab-Israeli peace process by lending full support to the ongoing Palestinian uprising, suspending all further political, diplomatic and economic links with Israel, and fueling the propaganda war by labeling Israeli leaders and military officers as "war criminals." Despite the apparent effort by host Egypt to moderate the tone of the event, the summitters pointedly did not endorse the U.S.-brokered Sharm al-Shaykh ceasefire, did not mention the Oslo peace process, and declared the current clashes to be a state of "war." While the summitters fell short of demanding a full severing of treaty relations or of calling for military action against Israel, the combination of rhetoric and operational proposals in the final communiqué cannot but exacerbate an already tense and violent situation.

The Good News A comparison between the final communiqué and the draft text circulated prior to the summit shows a few areas where the Arab leaders stepped back from crossing risky political red lines. On normalization with Israel, the draft version had called for a cutting of all Arab ties "established in the shadow" of Oslo, whereas the final communiqué called for a series of more limited acts that themselves were quite substantial: refraining from opening any new forms of relations with Israel, suspending all official or unofficial activities within the multilateral peace process and stopping all regional economic initiatives with Israel (during the summit, Tunis joined Oman in severing economic ties with Israel). On Iraq, the draft version had called for the termination of United Nations sanctions, but the final communiqué did not address the issue at all, most likely due to the opposition of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The Bad News On virtually all other matters, the final communiqué issued by the summitters matched neatly with a draft text that appeared in the pro-Syrian Lebanese newspaper al-Safir last Friday. The leaders' statement extolled the ongoing intifada against Israel and pointedly rejected any hint of supporting a cease-fire. Indeed, the leaders

specifically sanctioned further "martyrdom" as a means of achieving a just settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute and praised the "virtuous blood [of Palestinian martyrs as] a valuable asset for the sake of liberating the land, setting up the State and establishing peace."

War Crimes. The summit statement holds Israel solely responsible for the last three weeks of violence and demands that the United Nations establish an international court to try the "Israeli war criminals who perpetrated massacres against the Palestinians and Arabs in the occupied territories." In addition, the summit noted that Arab states themselves "will, under international law, prosecute those responsible for the savage practices." Portentously, this puts the Arab leaders on record as raising the prospect that Israeli diplomats, officials and military officers might be subject to arrest and prosecution should they visit Arab countries.

Internationalization versus the U.S. Role. If one of the Palestinian objectives over the last month has been to transcend the confines of the U.S.-led diplomacy and bring in a wide range of international actors that might, in Palestinian eyes, provide a counterweight to the American role, the Cairo summit wholly endorsed this approach. In their statement, the Arab leaders called upon the UN Security Council to "assume the responsibility of providing the necessary protection for the Palestinian people...by considering the establishment of an international force or presence for this purpose." Whereas the United States was not itself named in the communiqué, there was a not-so-subtle warning to President Clinton not to proceed with an initiative he hinted at when the Camp David summit closed in July, i.e., the relocation to Jerusalem of the U.S. embassy in Israel by the end of 2000. In this context, the document recalls a decision of the 1980 Arab summit which resolved to "sever all relations with states which relocate their embassies to Jerusalem or recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital." Not coincidentally, this threat echoes calls from various Palestinian factions-including Arafat's Fatah-published during the past week in *Al Hayat al Jadida*, the paper of the Palestinian Authority.

A Step toward Separation? In one of the most interesting passages of the communiqué, Arab heads-of-state seemed to endorse at least one aspect of the idea of separation that has been espoused by Ehud Barak and criticized by Yasir Arafat. Specifically, in outlining the rationale behind an \$800 million "al-Aqsa Fund," the summitters noted that the money would "enable the Palestinian people to disengage from its subservience to the Israeli economy."

Where is the Peace Process? Perhaps the most startling aspect of the communiqué is that it makes virtually no mention of the diplomacy that has constituted the Arab-Israeli peace process for the last seven years--no mention of the Oslo Accords, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (which itself is not mentioned), or the Camp David summit meeting. Instead, the Arab leaders reiterated the longstanding list of Arab demands in negotiations--implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, UN General Assembly resolution 194 regarding refugees, full Israeli withdrawal to the June 4, 1967 borders (applying to all fronts, with a special endorsement of the Lebanese demand for withdrawal from the Shabaa Farms) and the "return" (sic) of "Holy Jerusalem to full Palestinian sovereignty." In essence, this is a pre-Madrid-era communiqué, one that completely ignores the U.S.-led bilateral Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy since Oslo.

Success or Failure of U.S. Policy. Clearly, the worst fears of U.S. diplomats were not realized in Cairo-- no joint military command was established, no military assistance was promised to Palestinians, no treaties were broken, no ambassadors were withdrawn and no formal promise to rehabilitate Saddam was made. Nevertheless, the summit communiqué can hardly be termed "moderate." Rather, the summit underscored how tenuous have been the enormous diplomatic achievements of recent years, such that they could be frozen or rolled back in a matter of weeks. In a larger sense, the summit-with its sharp break from the Sharm al-Shaykh understandings of just last week-highlights the weakness of the Clinton Administration in trying to shape the course of regional events at this turbulent time. Indeed, it suggests that at this moment of great unrest and violence, the effort to maintain distance, balance and the role of "honest broker" may neither be appropriate or welcome.

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Policy #498

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