



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

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Regulating Arab Politics (2): The Doha Arab League Summit

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman and Joseph Kostiner

The annual Arab League summit conference, held this year in Doha, Qatar on March 31, was unusually brief (one day instead of the usual three), devoid of either substantive debate or controversy (apart from Libyan leader Mu`ammar al-Qadhafi's televised sarcastic jab at Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah), and missing the president of Egypt, the Arab world's traditional *primus inter pares*, who demonstratively distanced himself from the Qatari-sponsored event. The honored presence of Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, recently indicted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur, highlighted just how out of step the Arab system can be with prevailing international norms and trends. Overall, the summit served to emphasize the Arab world's state of collective weakness and internal divisions, in the face of the preponderance of power accumulated by the three non-Arab states in the region – Iran, Turkey and Israel. As such, it called into question the very utility of the summit

conference as a means to both fashion and advance collective Arab policies while regulating inter-Arab differences.

The context of the summit was hardly propitious. Rival inter-Arab gatherings during the previous two months had exposed raw nerves over key issues. Iran's growing power projection into the Arab heartland was of deep concern to Sunni Arab leaders, and had just been reinforced by Iran's implicit threat to Bahrain, manifested in a senior official's statement that the tiny Arab Gulf monarchy is in fact part of Iranian territory. In addition, there was the Hamas-Fatah impasse, and Israel's war in Gaza.

Understanding the lay of the land on the eve of the League summit requires a brief explanation. The conventional "radical vs. moderate" analysis of regional divisions, pitting Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority against Syria, Hamas, Libya and non-Arab Iran, was insufficiently nuanced. In the absence of a single predominant Arab power able to coordinate the diverse positions of various Arab states, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were all left with trying as best they could to mediate inter-Arab differences in order to advance their own specific interests. Each took a different approach, and the results were put on display in Doha.

Saudi Arabia has traditionally fashioned itself as the mediator *par excellence* of inter-Arab conflicts, combining ample financial resources, a non-confrontational public style and tribal political cultural norms to manage regional conflicts in order to minimize their potential threat to the kingdom. In recent years, the Saudis have taken a more forward position, promoting the Arab peace initiative for the Arab-Israeli conflict at the 2002 Beirut Arab summit and having it reconfirmed at the Riyadh 2007 summit, challenging Syria's and Hizballah's actions in Lebanon and the deepening of Syria's strategic link with Iran, brokering a short-lived reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah, and seeking to contain Iran by engaging it diplomatically while pressuring Arab parties to avoid Tehran's embrace. Overall, though, the Saudis had only meager results to show for their efforts. Hence, in the early months of 2009, during the so-called "war of the summits" (*TEL AVIV NOTES*, March 26, 2009), Saudi Arabia pulled back from confrontation with

Qatar and Syria, and sought to calm the inter-Arab atmosphere. Riyadh continued along this path at the Doha Arab League summit, and was rewarded by its non-controversial emphasis in the summit's final statement on the continued relevance of the Arab peace initiative. As far as Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah was concerned, he could at least be satisfied with the brevity and calmness of the gathering (in that spirit, he even held a "reconciliation meeting" with Qadhafi on the sidelines of the conference). He could also note that his country, despite its limitations, could still be considered an important Arab and regional player.

Indeed, the Saudi promotion of a broad Arab reconciliation were cheered in various Arab quarters. However, it produced only limited results. Riyadh's previous failure, in 2007, to coordinate Arab regional politics and contain Iran was still fresh in Arab leaders' minds, and they thus approached the new initiative with skepticism. Major figures, such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, remained wedded to their particular agendas, even while paying lip service to the latest Saudi efforts. The absence of an effective coordinating umbrella mechanism was palpable.

Qatar's Amir, Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa, for his part, enjoyed the limelight conferred on him as host leader of the League summit, as Qatar continued to pursue an independent foreign policy. To be sure, Qatar's diplomatic initiatives in recent months on the Palestinian and Lebanese fronts, and its cozying up to Iran, had made both Egypt and Saudi Arabia extremely agitated. Keen to insure a modicum of comity at the League summit, Qatar refrained from replicating its actions at the gathering in Doha during the Gaza war, on 15-16 January 2009, when it invited Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadian and Hamas's Khalid Mash'al to attend.

Egypt, however, was in no mood to participate in the momentary facade of inter-Arab consensus being fashioned in Doha. Hosni Mubarak's demonstrative absence, and the presence of only a low-level diplomatic delegation, was a reflection of Egypt's extreme irritation with Qatar's ongoing attempts to carve out a prominent role in regional affairs, particularly in the Palestinian arena, at its expense. Moreover, Mubarak had little to

show for Egypt's own efforts, given its failure to deliver either an intra-Palestinian accord or a formal Hamas-Israel *tahdi'a* ("calming") and prisoner exchange, both of which were absolutely vital for jump-starting the reconstruction of Gaza and bringing international pressure to bear on Israel to renew Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. In addition, standing alongside Sudanese President Bashir would hardly play well in Western capitals, Egypt's traditional allies and patrons. Hence, Mubarak understood quite well that the Doha summit would produce nothing of substance, and that Egypt's interest would be best served by a clear downgrading of its delegation. In this way, Egypt sought to remind its fellow Arab states that they had no chance to act as a cohesive regional bloc vis-a-vis non-Arab regional or global powers, or even effectively manage inter-Arab conflicts, without Egypt playing a central role.

Syrian-Saudi relations had reached a nadir in recent years, but had recently begun to thaw, in spite of Saudi unhappiness with Syria's actions in Lebanon. At the Doha League summit, Syria, adopted a fence-sitting posture. Asad expressed willingness for peace with Israel, while continuing to support the "resistance" (*muqawwama*) against it and pledging to maintain its strategic alliance with Iran, which hardly tallied with Saudi efforts to forge a broad inter-Arab reconciliation. Still, the Saudis were in a non-confrontational mode, and kept their criticism to themselves.

The variety of particular Arab agendas at Doha had an unsettling impact on the Palestinian factions. A Hamas-Fatah declaration of reconciliation, preparing the ground for the establishment of a Palestinian unity government, would have crowned Egypt's direct mediation between the parties. It would also have placed Egypt ahead of Saudi Arabia with regard to the promotion of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace process and emphasized anew Cairo's central role in coordinating and regulating the Arab system. The Palestinians themselves would have gained in terms of allaying their factional strife. However, without an over-arching common policy, Arab states were left to pursue their own paths: Egypt failed to reconcile the Palestinian factions, while Syria, supported by Iran, maintained its support for Hamas supremacy in the Palestinian arena, and Saudi Arabia, the other aspiring Arab regional coordinator, was left with no access to

the Palestinian arena. As such, the Arab League had no new initiative for Arab-Israeli peace to offer to the Obama Administration.

The next two annual summits are scheduled to be held in Libya and Iraq. Given Qadhafi's iconoclastic and idiosyncratic actions, the fact that hardly any Arab states have even restored their embassies in Baghdad to full functioning, and the declining effectiveness of the League summit framework, the likelihood of full attendance by Arab heads of state, let alone registering substantial achievements, appears to be remote. At this point in time, given the gap between the political, strategic and economic challenges facing the region and the atrophying of collective Arab will, one may wonder whether they will even take place at all.

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