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**PATRONS, CLIENTS AND SHEPHERDS:  
THE SHARM AL-SHAYKH SUMMIT**

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The Arab-Israeli peace process has witnessed any number of summit meetings. Some of these produced concrete results; others, like the Casablanca economic summit in 1994 and the "anti-terrorism" summit in Sharm al-Shaykh in March 1996 were more fluff than substance. The failure of the Camp David summit in July 2000 and the subsequent descent into four years of violence have left both protagonists and observers wary of summit diplomacy, let alone "historic" breakthroughs. Nevertheless, this past week witnessed yet another "show," designed to take advantage of developments in recent months in order to ameliorate the situation on the ground. The immediate purpose was to help Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) consolidate his leadership and begin rebuilding the shattered Palestinian Authority, and to ensure that Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan from Gaza and the northern West Bank will be coordinated with the PA, retain the international community's seal of approval, and facilitate further diplomatic efforts.

Egyptian President Husni Mubarak's proposal to host Sharon and Abu Mazen, along with Jordan's King Abdallah, came as something of a surprise. However, it fit with Mubarak's publicly-stated belief that Sharon is serious in his intention to dismantle Jewish settlements in Gaza and is the only Israeli leader capable of doing so, hence, renewing the peace process and avoiding a further deterioration of the situation, with all that that would entail for the region. Moreover, hosting the summit was in line with Mubarak's efforts over the last few months to promote Egypt's image, both at home and abroad, as an indispensable factor in Arab-Israeli diplomacy and in the broader Middle East arena.

For Mubarak, as for all Egyptian leaders, the promotion of Egypt's regional preeminence is directly connected to domestic requirements. In Mubarak's case, the situation has become particularly delicate. Various groups have criticized his intention to run, unopposed, for a fifth six-year term. The recent

arrest of the leader of a tame, newly-created moderate political party demonstrated how feeble and hidebound Egypt's gestures towards liberalization -- the new mantra in the region -- have been. Of no less concern to Mubarak are the latest winds blowing from Washington, Egypt's international patron for 30 years. George W. Bush's explicit mention of Egypt and Saudi Arabia in his State of the Union address as allies who need to do more in the way of political reform and democratization was unprecedented, and must have angered and shaken the Egyptian leadership. Mubarak's reluctance to lend a hand to Bill Clinton's efforts at Camp David in July 2000 has not been forgotten in Washington and has probably occasioned considerable soul-searching in Cairo. Mubarak may hope to deflect these pressures by providing a friendly regional umbrella for the declared intentions of Abbas and Sharon to break the violent stalemate of the past four years and supporting their efforts with concrete actions such as returning Egypt's ambassador to Tel Aviv and working more vigorously to stop arms smuggling from Egypt into Gaza.

For King Abdallah, attending as a co-sponsor was a welcome media opportunity. Jordan has a keen and direct interest in Abu Mazen's success, which can stabilize its western border and its relations with Israel and with the United States. The uncertainty in Iraq, which greatly disturbs Jordan, only reinforces Abdallah's desire to be part of a forward-looking Palestinian-Israeli dynamic.

The main protagonists, Abu Mazen and Sharon, both found the Egyptian-Jordanian umbrella appealing, each for his own reasons. For Abu Mazen, the meeting reinforced the legitimacy of his decision to end the armed intifada, which he had consistently denounced over the last four years as detrimental to Palestinian interests. Moreover, it provided him with additional political leverage needed to cajole his domestic opponents and their regional sponsors, as well as skeptics within Fatah and the smaller Palestinian leftist factions, into accepting, at least tacitly, his path. For Abu Mazen, the greater his success at this stage, the more international backing he can expect in implementing the underlying principles of the Road Map.

Sharon, for his part, used the summit to cap an extraordinary turnabout in his international stature. By making him *persona grata* in both the Arab world and Europe, the summit reinforced his image of indispensability among the Israeli public and strengthened him in his contest with hard-liners at home.

Some observers were surprised by the demonstrated lack of a US presence at the summit, particularly as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was in Jerusalem and Ramallah just one day earlier. But from the outset, the Bush Administration (in contrast to its predecessor) has been reluctant to micro-manage the diplomatic process, something which it believes would only devalue US leverage and damage its prestige. At the same time, the US, clearly buoyed by the twin elections in the PA areas and Iraq and by the determination of Abu Mazen to depart from Arafat's path, appears to understand that this is not the time for benign neglect, either. That explains the appointment of Gen. William Ward, former head of NATO peacekeepers in Bosnia, to oversee Palestinian-Israeli security coordination on the ground. The fact that all four

parties to the summit were motivated, in part, by a desire to look good in Washington only adds to US prestige. How the US can best help the parties to help themselves will be Washington's main Arab-Israeli challenge during the coming period.

At various stages during the tortured history of the Arab-Jewish conflict, the Jewish/Israeli side (and some outside powers, as well) believed that some kind of grand deal with the Arab world could be struck, or at least that Arab patrons could somehow "deliver" the Palestinians. This belief repeatedly proved to be a chimera. Given both the collective and individual weaknesses of neighboring Arab states and the strength of Palestinian particularism, few such illusions remain. In any case, the situation is not ripe even for a Palestinian-Israeli permanent status agreement, let alone a comprehensive regional peace. But the current hurting stalemate between Israel and the Palestinians can be exploited for purposes of de-escalation and stabilization, which may lead to a self-sustaining negotiating dynamic. A supportive regional environment of the kind demonstrated at Sharm al-Shaykh can only contribute to the incremental progress that now seems possible.

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