Exercise in futility

Is Arab summitry still relevant?

THE ANNUAL Arab League summit conference, held in Kuwait City on March 25-26, was barely noticed by the international media. Even the numerous Arab media outlets provided only relatively cursory coverage and quickly moved on to other matters.

This was entirely understandable: Only 13 heads of state actually attended, with the other nine states being represented by lower ranking officials. More importantly, the resolutions that were adopted were entirely predictable and, like most Arab League resolutions, are unlikely to be implemented. It's not surprising therefore that Arab publics are extremely cynical regarding their leaders' abilities to match their words with deeds.

STEPHANIE MCGEHEE / REUTERS

The closing ceremony of the 25th Arab Summit at Bayan Palace, Kuwait, March 26

Arab summits were not always such routine affairs.

Former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser convened the first official all-Arab summit conference, in January 1964, to reassert his leadership over a divided Arab house. Summit conferences would be a crucial arena for Arab leaders who sought much needed legitimacy at home and protection from external adversaries.

Historically significant summits included the Khartoum "3 NOs" summit after the June 1967 war; the Rabat summit of 1974, which conferred crucial all-Arab legitimacy on the Palestine Liberation Organization; the Baghdad summit of 1978, which punished Egypt for the Camp David Accords; the Cairo summit of August 1990, which confirmed Arab participation in the Western-led military coalition that would oust Iraq from Kuwait; and the Beirut Summit of 2002, which adopted the Arab Peace Initiative for a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Ironically, the achievement during the last decade of the long proclaimed goal of convening an annual summit, regardless of existing differences, has been accompanied by mostly forgettable gatherings. The reason is that Arab states, individually and collectively, have become steadily weaker and unable to exercise effective influence over burning regional events, especially when compared to non-Arab regional powers – Turkey, Iran and Israel.

The Arab Spring upheavals of the last three years have further exacerbated this situation, but did not create it.

The two traditional leading (and rival) Arab powers – Egypt and Iraq – have been utterly consumed with internal affairs, and thus incapable of exercising regional leadership. Saudi Arabia partially filled the resulting vacuum. Indeed, the Saudi-led "club of monarchies" – the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Jordan and Morocco – has been the only coherent bloc of Arab states acting to stabilize Yemen and Bahrain, remove Libya's Muammar Gaddafi from power, and support the Syrian opposition in its violent struggle against President Bashar Assad.

Uppermost in Saudi Arabian thinking is the need to combat the threat posed by Shi'ite Islamic Iran's bid for regional hegemony, expressed through its support of the Assad regime, considerable influence over the Maliki government in Iraq, backing for the Lebanese Hezbollah, meddling in Yemen and, even more worrisome, in Bahrain.

The absence of Egypt from the regional scene has been keenly felt by the Saudis and like-minded Sunni Arab monarchies. Hence, the overthrow of Mohammed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government by the Egyptian military was received with delight in Riyadh. The Saudis, along with the UAE and Kuwait, are providing enormous sums of money to assist Egypt's rulers in stabilizing the economy.

By contrast, Qatar, long the GCC's gadfly opponent to Saudi dominance, has been a steadfast supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood, of separate groups among the Syrian opposition, and of the Palestinian Hamas (a branch of the Brotherhood). Matters came to a head in early March, as the Saudis, Bahrain and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar over its backing of the Brotherhood, which both Cairo and Riyadh now branded a terrorist organization.

Given the open rift within the GCC, the new confidence of the Syrian regime in confronting a disorganized and discouraged Syrian opposition, and the unwillingness of either the US or Turkey to intervene to decisively tip the balance of power on the ground, the possibility of a united and effective Arab stance emerging from the Kuwait summit was nil.

Saudi calls for concerted action to provide greater military support for the Syrian opposition could not be translated into action. The leader of the opposition Syrian National Coalition was allowed to address the summit, but not to fill Syria's empty chair at the table (unlike the previous year's summit), following reservations expressed by Iraq, Lebanon and Algeria.

Only Palestine provided consensus for the summit-goers. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas received full backing for his rejection of the Israeli demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Hardly noticed was the summit's reaffirmation of the Arab Peace Initiative as the basis for an acceptable settlement of the conflict. On this matter, as well, Arab leaders had no illusions that their actions would have any immediate impact.

Interestingly, Egypt sought and received permission to host next year's summit, a sign that its rulers would be seeking to restore Cairo's traditional leading role in regional and inter-Arab affairs, and that the institution of the summit was a tool relevant to achieving that goal. Success in the matter will ultimately depend on the ability of the Egyptian regime to consolidate and stabilize its authority. ■

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