



The Impotent Summit

STUDENTS OF ARAB POLITICS can perhaps be forgiven for waxing a bit nostalgic about Arab summit conferences. For nearly four decades, Arab summit conferences had considerable impact on regional dynamics and developments: from the first Cairo summit in 1964, which laid the basis for the creation of the PLO, to the famous “three no’s” of Khartoum in August 1967, to Rabat 1974, which confirmed the PLO’s status as the “sole legitimate representative,” to Baghdad 1978, which punished Egypt for making peace with Israel, to Fez 1982, which tendered qualified recognition of Israel, to Cairo 1990, which (barely) gave Arab legitimacy to the international coalition against Saddam Hussein’s conquest of Kuwait, to Beirut 2002, which produced the Arab Peace Initiative.

This is no longer the case, a reflection of the decline of the power of Arab states, individually and collectively, and the corresponding clout of their non-Arab neighbors in the region – Turkey, Iran and Israel. Still, the Arab summit conference in the coastal Libyan town of Sirte at the end of March offers a snapshot into the current state of the Arab system.

Given his past record, host Muammar Gadhafi was expected to supply the unexpected, in terms of political theater (or comic relief). In that vein, he tendered a few insults directed at Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas; his earlier meeting with some former members of Saddam Hussein’s government nearly caused Iraq’s foreign minister to abandon the preparatory foreign ministers’ meeting; proper hotel accommodations for the foreign press corps were lacking; and the incessant playing of 1960s’ Arab nationalist songs in the corridors offered his own version of nostalgia. Overall, however, Gadhafi avoided controversy.

Indeed, the summit provided very little in the way of drama. A number of heads of state were absent, including the leaders of the pro-Western Sunni bloc of Arab states – Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, who was recuperating from surgery, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah, who shares a mutual antipathy society with Gadhafi, and Morocco’s King Muhammad VI. Nor was Iraq’s President Jalal Talabani at the Sirte meeting. Rather, he was visiting Iran’s President Ahmadinejad, as were many other Iraqi politicians, seeking to sort out the aftermath of Iraqi national elections, a stark indication of Iraq’s geopolitical tilt eastward since Saddam’s overthrow, towards Iran and away from the Arab system.

The leader whose speech drew the most attention at the Sirte summit was a guest, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, whose strident criticism of Israel and Israeli policies regarding Jerusalem was received warmly, although not by Palestinian President Abbas. Erdogan’s presence provided a stark indication of Turkey’s new assertiveness in the region.

Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa also created a stir by



calling for the creation of an Arab “Neighborhood League,” which would promote dialogue between Arab states and neighboring Mediterranean, southern European, African and Middle East states (excluding Israel). The proposal, which may well have been coordinated with Syria, Qatar and others, did not sit well at all with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who saw it as legitimizing Iran’s regional behavior and aspirations. Moussa’s call for a reevaluation of the collective Arab strategy regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process, which he said had failed to produce the desired results after a decade of “open-endedness,” seemed more reflective of Syria’s view than Egypt’s or

Saudi Arabia’s, the author of the Arab peace initiative.

Given Moussa’s own background as former Egyptian foreign minister and thus an integral member of Egypt’s ruling elite, the space between his declared views and the Egyptian government’s was noteworthy, as was Moussa’s highly publicized meeting the previous month with former IAEA head and fellow Egyptian Muhammad ElBaradei, who is challenging the political status quo in Egypt.

The most significant axis of tension in inter-Arab affairs at this point in time is between Egypt and Syria, which was reflected in a variety of ways at the summit. Syrian President Bashar Asad has managed to substantially strengthen Syria’s regional weight in recent years, restoring its preeminence and patronage over Lebanon’s feuding communities, deepening its ties with Turkey, maintaining its strategic relationship with Iran while achieving a thaw in Saudi-Syrian relations, and extending its support to Hizballah and Hamas, thus blocking Egypt’s efforts to achieve intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

All of this has been deeply disturbing to Egypt: indeed, the editor of the al-Ahram daily newspaper, in commenting on the summit, called Syria Iran’s “Trojan Horse.”

The decisions of the two-day affair in Sirte were barely noticeable. The gathering had been labeled the summit for “Supporting the Steadfastness of Jerusalem” in order to highlight Arab concerns with Israeli policies there. An action plan for Jerusalem including the allocation of \$500 million to bolster its Palestinian population was adopted, and plans to convene an international conference on Jerusalem, in Qatar, in three months time, were announced. The much-heralded Arab Peace Initiative was barely referred to in the summit’s final declaration, although peace remained a “strategic choice.” An additional follow-up summit was scheduled for the same venue, to be held in October.

Overall, the impact of what one Palestinian commentator termed “the impotent summit” appeared to be close to zero, reflecting the overall state of Arab fragmentation and weakness. ●