



Summit or siesta?

Facing the heat of regional turmoil, Arab League leaders offer little in terms of substance

LAST WEEK'S Arab League summit conference, hosted by Jordan's King Abdullah on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, provided no drama and produced a set of resolutions that carried little weight. This came as no surprise. After all, Arab summits reflect regional realities, and the primary locus of power in the Middle East is located in the non-Arab regional powers – Turkey, Iran and Israel. Moreover, the high hopes generated by the “Second Arab Awakening” of 2011 have long since dissipated, as civil wars, foreign military intervention, the reassertion of strong authoritarian regimes, the exacerbation of sectarian fissures and the emergence of a new and virulent strain of jihadist terrorism combined to exact a horrific human toll. Arab populations are now even worse off than before on every measurable index of human development and well-being – whether it be health, access to clean water, education, employment, basic security, or human rights.

Nor are Arab states in agreement on how to address the multiple issues on their collective agenda: the raging myriad conflicts in their countries – in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen; the meshing of Iranian power projection and militant Shi'ite Islam; combating Sunni jihadist terrorism, embodied by Islamic State and al-Qaida; Kurdish ethno-nationalism; Turkey's neo-Ottoman pretension and policies; and the long-festering Palestinian issue; as well as the social, economic and political shortcomings of their regimes, which lie at the root of their individual and collective weakness.

Nonetheless, the summit provided some insight into the state of play in the Arab region. No less than fifteen heads of state attended the 22-nation conference, indicating their belief in the meeting's importance. As its host, King Abdullah was keen on the summit displaying as broad a consensus as possible regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Syrian civil war, particularly toward the Trump administration, whose special envoy attended as an observer and held a number of meetings with Arab leaders. To be sure, the summit's final statement broke no new ground on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, while reiterating a commitment to the 15-year-old Arab Peace initiative. But talk of a new regional initiative and the renewal of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations remained in the air, and will undoubtedly be discussed in upcoming visits to Washington by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and King Abdullah.

An important component to the fragile picture of consensus was a thaw in Egyptian-Saudi relations, which had become frosty over the last year, owing to Egypt's preference for the continued survival of

Bashar Assad's regime in Syria, against Saudi wishes, and its refusal to take an active role on the ground in Yemen as part of the Saudi-led coalition against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. The Saudis had already resumed the supply of oil to Egypt after a months-long suspension, and concluded a \$1.5 billion development aid package, and a meeting on the summit's sidelines between Saudi King Salman and Sisi sealed the resumption of normal relations.

The Syrian regime had been suspended from the Arab League in 2011, and its seat at the 2013 summit in Qatar had been handed to the opposition coalition. But this scenario has not repeated itself since – with Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Oman all favoring the return of the Assad government to its seat, and the Gulf states opposed. The Syrian place at the table was left empty, marked only by the country's flag (the regime's, not the opposition's). With the fate of Syria in others' hands, Arab leaders could only reiterate their commitment “to find a peaceful solution that preserves the unity of the country, its sovereignty and independence and ends the presence of terrorist groups.”

IRAN'S EXPANDING reach continued to loom large. To the chagrin of Lebanon's Hezbollah-supported President Michel Aoun, five former Lebanese leaders issued a stinging memorandum criticizing Hezbollah's, and, by extension, Iran's domination of their country. Yemen's President Abd Rabbu Mansour al-Hadi devoted much of his summit speech to rebuking Iran's meddling in his country, and the summit's final statement condemned Iranian interference in the Arab world, albeit not by name (thereby enabling Lebanon and Iraq to accede to it).

Arab commentators and Twitter devotees were understandably cynical about the entire proceedings. Former Jordanian foreign minister Marwan Mouasher published a what-if alternative closing statement that emphasized the leaders' commitment to addressing the real needs of their citizens. In contrast, a Nasserite Egyptian commentator berated Arab leaders for their continued “surrender” to Israel, declaring, “May God protect you, O Palestine, from the Arab summits and their people.” And the blogosphere was ablaze with photos of the “Arab Siesta”: Arab leaders slumped in their chairs sleeping during the proceedings, proving, at least to many, that a picture is worth a thousand words.

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