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Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

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THE AMMAN ARAB SUMMIT CONFERENCE: THE COLLECTIVE AND THE PARTICULAR

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman
The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

For years, Arab analysts and politicians bemoaned the absence of a regular annual Arab summit that would compel Arab leaders to meet and formulate collective policies on important issues. Instead, summits were held only irregularly, usually in times of crisis and only after elaborate inter-Arab maneuvering to defuse tensions between various participants. Arab summits did occasionally produce historic decisions that shaped subsequent policies. Examples include the Three No's at Khartoum (no peace, no negotiation, no recognition of Israel) in 1967; the recognition of the PLO at Rabat in 1974; the boycott and isolation of Egypt at Baghdad in 1978-79; and the formulation of the anti-Iraq coalition at Cairo in 1990. For the most part, however, Arab summits produced resolutions that were ignored and soon forgotten.

The most recent Arab Summit, held in Amman on March 27-28, constitutes yet another effort to hold regular annual meetings. Scheduled by the emergency Cairo Summit of October 2000, its main success is that it was held at all.

In substantive terms, the Summit can point to few concrete achievements. Still, its deliberations and decisions provide an opportunity to assess collective and individual policies with respect to the two main issues on the Arab agenda – the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iraqi question.

The Arab-Israeli 'file' actually generated little debate because of the consensus in support of the Palestinian people's "heroic struggle." The Cairo Summit had been held in an atmosphere of crisis. Arab governments were extremely sensitive to public demands for action on behalf of the Palestinians and some were concerned that the conflict would undermine regional and domestic stability. Those concerns seem to have abated, at least for the time being, since the *intifada* has been transformed into a series of more lethal but localized clashes lacking many of the 'popular' manifestations that had characterized its initial phase.

The Palestinian leadership achieved its primary goal in Amman -- to secure at least part of the billion dollars pledged in Cairo but never delivered. The failure of the Arab states to deliver on their October promise had caused them considerable embarrassment. This time, it was agreed that $180 million be disbursed over six months by the Islamic Development Bank to support the Palestinian Authority's budget. The first installment of a $60m soft loan would be

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paid out as well. Given the distressed condition of the Palestinian economy, these are small sums, but they will at least enable the PA to continue paying salaries.

The Palestinians also enjoyed unrestrained rhetorical support. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad condemned Israelis as worse than the Nazis, and Iraqi Vice-President `Izzat Ibrahim delivered Saddam Husayn's call, "may God damn the Jews." As in October, Israeli attacks against the Palestinians were described as "crimes against humanity" and "racist practices," and the Summit demanded that the UN Security Council put Israeli "war criminals" on trial. In addition to reiterating the decision to freeze all relations with Israel, mention was also made of reactivating the moribund Arab Boycott Office in Damascus. The Palestinian insistence on the right of return for Palestinian refugees, perhaps THE central cause for the breakdown of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in their last phase, was prominently endorsed by the summit. At the same time, Egypt and Jordan, the two countries with peace treaties with Israel and thus the ones most eager to contain the violence and revive the diplomatic process, could be satisfied with the summit's renewed endorsement of the centrality of UN resolutions and of the land-for-peace principle which has given international legitimacy to all post-1967 diplomatic efforts.

As has been the case since Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the Iraqi issue remained the most divisive subject facing the Summit and the Arab world. The steady erosion of support for the international sanctions regime and widespread sympathy with the sufferings of the Iraqi people had weakened the Kuwaiti-Saudi insistence on holding Iraq accountable for its actions as a price for its reentry into the Arab system. Arab leaders, led by Jordan's King Abdallah, strove to achieve an agreed formula that would satisfy both Kuwait and Iraq and lead to an easing of the sanctions while not contradicting US-led international resolutions. As host of the conference, Abdallah had a personal interest in a successful resolution of this problem. But there were larger issues at stake for him: sympathy for Iraq is perhaps greater in Jordan than anywhere else in the Arab world, and Iraq's economic well-being is crucial for Jordan's own precarious economy. The Kuwaitis and Saudis demonstrated considerable flexibility in behind-the-scenes talks. But Kuwait refused to waive its demand that Iraq acknowledge the inviolability of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and release the 600 missing Kuwaitis whom Kuwait insists are being held as prisoners in Iraq. For the Saudis, the primary issue was Iraq's willingness to accept the modified weapons inspection and monitoring regime proposed by the Security Council in return for an easing of economic sanctions. Iraq, for its part, maintained an unyielding line throughout the discussions, insisting on Arab support for the total and unconditional removal of all sanctions. As a result, no breakthrough was achieved. The only thing left to do was to keep talking, and the Summit established a mediating committee headed by King Abdallah. Although they called the Summit a failure, the Iraqis could take some comfort in the final declaration that called for an end to sanctions and placed the issue of allegedly missing Iraqis on the same footing as the Kuwaiti missing persons.

In the end, both the Israeli-Palestinian and Iraqi questions will be determined, not in the gatherings of Arab heads of state, but elsewhere: on the ground, in other diplomatic forums, and though the decisions of individual actors. By and large, Arab governments appear to have accepted and internalized the primacy of *raison d'état* in their approach to regional issues. Lowered expectations of the outcomes of Arab summit conferences appear to reflect a more sober recognition by Arab leaders and broader publics alike of the realities of regional and international power, and perhaps of their own limitations.

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