No.4

TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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November 23, 2000

THE ARAB WORLD AND THE 'AQSA INTIFADA'

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Egypt's decision to recall its ambassador to Israel for 'consultations' illustrates the growing unease felt by most Arab regimes after seven weeks of Israeli-Palestinian violence. This move followed the severing of lower-level official ties with Israel by Tunisia, Morocco, and Qatar and the ratcheting up of Israel's military response to Palestinian violence. It had several objectives: to placate Egypt's own public opinion, to satisfy others in the Arab world, and to warn Israel and the US of the consequences of continuing confrontation. Not surprisingly, Jordan quickly followed suit by affirming that its own newly appointed ambassador, who had not yet taken up his post, would remain home indefinitely. Mauritania, which established full diplomatic relations with Israel only last autumn, was likely to face increased pressure to act in a similar fashion.

Taken together with anti-Israeli resolutions at recent Arab and Islamic summit conferences, the overall picture of Arab-Israeli relations is now bleaker than at any time since the 1993 breakthrough at Oslo. Moreover, a further escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence could conceivably alter the calculus of most Arab states, according to which a military confrontation is seen as inconsistent with the need to address pressing domestic concerns in the post-Cold War era of globalization.

At the root of the dilemma facing Arab governments is the way that Israeli-Palestinian violence plays at home. For seven weeks, graphic scenes from the West Bank and Gaza have been beamed into Arab homes, not only by national media, but also by Arab satellite TV networks free to carry criticism of governments for their alleged failure to do enough on behalf of the Palestinians.

In view of the inflamed emotions and widespread criticism of Arab "passivity," the measured responses by most Arab governments suggest that the fears voiced in Israel of an imminent slide toward wider regional conflict were perhaps alarmist and certainly premature. Most Arab states, led by Egypt, continue to rule out war as an option under any circumstances. Moreover, they still appear to possess sufficient resources to maintain internal stability and avoid being led by the mythical "Arab street."

Their ability to exercise restraint was evident at the emergency Arab Summit Conference in Cairo, on 21-22 October. This Summit, like the last one four years earlier, was orchestrated by Egypt, chief patron of the Palestinians and self-defined *primus inter pares* among Arab states. In fact, Egypt was reluctant to hold a summit in October, preferring instead to pursue a facilitating role between the Palestinians and Israelis, in coordination with the US and France. Arguing that greater preparation was needed, Egypt originally set a January 2001 date for the meeting. But as the violence continued unabated and demonstrations erupted throughout the Arab world, the date was moved forward. At the same time, President Husni Mubarak poured

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY
The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
http://www.tau.ac.il./jcss/ http://www.dayan.org

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withering scorn on the radicals, such as Yemen's president 'Ali Abdallah Salih, who proclaimed their eagerness for war, and he accused them of being ready to fight to the last drop of Egyptian blood.

As always, the Summit proceedings and final statement were a product of the positions and interests of various Arab states, with an eye cast toward Arab public opinion. The speeches of Mubarak, King Muhammad of Morocco and King Abdallah of Jordan were the most moderate in tone and content, emphasizing the need for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Syria's new president, Bashar al-Asad, spoke more militantly, in keeping with Syria's decision to support Hizbullah probes on Israel's border. Bashar even contacted Yasir Arafat by telephone before the Summit, despite Syria's longstanding distaste for the Palestinian leader. Saudi Arabia, eager to demonstrate its commitment to Islamic causes and its support for the Palestinian people, advocated the creation of two special funds, one for the preservation of Jerusalem's Arab and Islamic character, and one for the families of Palestinian "martyrs." Kuwait pledged funds as well. This marked a turning point in Kuwaiti-Palestinian relations, which had been ruptured by Palestinian support for Iraq in 1990. A number of countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Saudi Arabia sent special medical planes to transport wounded Palestinians to their hospitals for treatment.

To Egypt's relief, Libya's Mu'ammar Qadhdhafi stayed away, anticipating that the Summit's resolutions would not be sufficiently confrontational. Interestingly, Algeria's President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika gave the cold shoulder to Arafat, and popular expressions of support for the Palestinians were discouraged in Algiers.

Particularly noteworthy was the participation of Iraq. The Palestinian-Israeli confrontation has been a boon to Saddam Husayn. Sanctions against Iraq were already eroding and several Arab countries were gingerly upgrading their ties. But the ongoing violence provided Saddam with an opportunity to cultivate more public support in the Arab world by reminding others of his militancy on behalf of the Palestinians. The Kuwaitis were particularly concerned that the Palestinian-Israeli crisis was accelerating Iraq's reentry into the Arab fold and eroding the standing of the United States in the region.

The wording of the Summit's final communiqué was especially harsh, including a demand that the Security Council set up an international court to try Israeli "war criminals" guilty of "massacres" of Palestinians. At the same time, Arab leaders reiterated their commitment to a "just and comprehensive peace" based on UN resolutions. No explicit demands were made on those Arab governments who had official relations with Israel of one sort or another. But the expectations were clear, especially for those with lower level ties. Almost immediately, Morocco and Tunisia closed their diplomatic missions in Israel, and Oman shut its trade office. Qatar held out for a time but soon succumbed to Saudi and Iranian pressure in order to save the Islamic Conference Organization Summit it hosted three weeks later.

One month after the Summit, the picture remains uncertain. The Palestinian cause has again thrust itself into the center of collective Arab discourse. Public opinion, as expressed through student and professional unions, political parties and opposition Islamist movements, continues to clamor for further concrete action against Israel. As a result, many Arab rulers (especially King Abdallah of Jordan) watch the unfolding situation with apprehension, fearing both domestic and regional consequences of further violence.

The previous Palestinian intifada ended in a kind of "draw," with both parties sufficiently "hurting" and exhausted to enable creative diplomacy to break the political deadlock. There is no guarantee that this will happen again. The underlying factors militating against a spread of violence throughout the region remain operational. But the current intifada contains the potential seeds for further deterioration, whose ramifications would be felt far beyond the Israeli-Palestinian sphere.

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