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## **THINGS AREN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE: THE KHARTOUM ARAB SUMMIT CONFERENCE**

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For more than four decades, Arab summit conferences have served as benchmarks for measuring the state of the Arab world. Some of them have also set important baselines shaping regional diplomacy for years to come (e.g., the 1967 Khartoum "3 No's" Summit; the 1974 Rabat Summit's recognition of the PLO; the rejection of Sadat's initiative at the 1978 Baghdad Summit; the formulation of Arab conditions for peace with Israel at Fez in 1982, updated in Beirut in 2002; and the establishment of a Western-Arab coalition against Iraq in 1990 at the Cairo Summit). So no matter how many resolutions went unimplemented and however cynical Arab publics had grown towards these diplomatic spectacles, Arab summits still seemed to matter.

In recent years, however, the weakness of Arab states vis-à-vis non-Arab regional powers and the international community has reached unprecedented levels. Their utter powerlessness in March 2003 to block American efforts to achieve regime change in Iraq and, indeed, the quiet cooperation of Arab Gulf states in that effort starkly highlighted this state of affairs. Consequently, Arab summits have ceased to generate much interest, and the routinization of these now-annual meetings has only reinforced the sense that Arab summits have become an exercise in irrelevance.

For a brief moment, the Khartoum Summit

scheduled for March 28-30 this year seemed to promise a revival, if only because of the urgency of the issues on the agenda. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict had entered a new phase following the election of a Hamas government and Israel's unilateral disengagement and leadership change. Worsening sectarian strife in Iraq had increased calls for renewed Arab League involvement. UN Security Council pressure on Syria following the assassination of Lebanon's former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005 and on Sudan in light of its support of mass murder of black Muslim tribesmen in Darfur placed Arab states in awkward positions. Iran's standoff with the international community over its nuclear program was also deeply worrisome. The overall picture cried out for collective Arab action.

But Arab leaders saw no possibilities for concrete achievements on any of these issues. Moreover, their mere presence in Khartoum would serve to legitimize the host regime's policies in Darfur, rendering them guilty by association. Hence, they voted with their feet. No less than eight heads of state, including Egyptian President Mubarak, Saudi King Abdullah and Tunisian President Ben Ali delegated others to represent them, thereby diminishing the value of whatever decisions might be taken, and in the absence of substantive discussions, the summit was cut short by a day.

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Regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the summit revalidated the Beirut summit's commitment to peace and normalization with Israel based on the June 4, 1967 boundary lines and a solution to the Palestinian refugee question as stipulated in UN General Assembly Resolution 194 and simply added to the formula a denunciation of Israel's "racist apartheid wall" and a defense of the Palestinian electoral process. To the Palestinians' disappointment, Arab leaders renewed their financial commitment to the PA (\$55m. per month, which has never been fully honored) but parried requests for an increase. Some Hamas leaders complained that they weren't even invited to participate, but their presence would have merely highlighted the fact that Hamas does not accept the Beirut parameters for a peace settlement.

Iraqi officials chastised the attendees for their less-than-full solidarity with Iraq and called on all states to return their ambassadors to Baghdad. But the final communiqué noted only the efforts by Arab League Secretary-General 'Amr Mousa to promote national reconciliation in Iraq while expressing solidarity with the Iraqi people and support for Iraqi independence and territorial unity, reforms in the government's structure (to accommodate the Sunni minority), non-interference in its internal affairs and an end to attacks on holy sites. Unmentioned but hovering in the background was concern about Iranian involvement in Iraq and possible US-Iran contacts on the matter.

The Syrian-Lebanese impasse proved particularly embarrassing because Prime Minister Fuad Siniora attended separately from the beleaguered, Syrian-backed President, Emile Lahoud. Syria received full backing from the summit in the face of US sanctions but opponents of the Asad regime could take solace from the endorsement of the ongoing investigation into Hariri's murder.

Strikingly absent from the final communiqué was any direct reference the dispute over Iran's nuclear program, indicating the lack of Arab consensus on the matter. True, the summit did

call on the international community to declare the Middle East "an area free from weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons," but only Israel was singled out in a demand that it commit itself to signing the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and opening all its nuclear activities to the International Atomic Energy Agency. The only explicit mention of Iran came in a reiteration of the long-standing Arab demand that Tehran return three disputed islands to the United Arab Emirates.

All this suited Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir just fine. He had run into difficulties hosting the African Union summit two months earlier. Now, however, he was on friendlier ground. Facing a fresh Security Council resolution calling for the dispatch of UN troops to replace the undermanned and underfinanced African Union peacekeepers in Darfur, Bashir stood firm in rejecting any imposed foreign presence, and Arab leaders lined up behind him, pledging funding for the African Union troops for another six months beginning on October 1<sup>st</sup> and expressing their desire to increase the number of Arab contingents among them.

Some months earlier, Algeria had suggested that the headquarters of the Arab League be rotated among member states, a suggestion quickly shot down by Egypt in order to preserve its prerogatives as *primus inter pares*. The Khartoum Summit reaffirmed this status; Secretary-General (and former Egyptian foreign minister) 'Amr Mousa was nominated for another term without opposition. Saudi Arabia also confirmed Cairo's status, in a manner of speaking, by refusing to host next year's summit, thus sending it back to Cairo as the site of League headquarters. In effect, the Saudi action implied that the summit was becoming an empty shell. In an effort to salvage the situation, Egypt proposed that one-day consultative summits be held in between the annual gathering. But that hardly guarantees that Cairo 2007 will be any different than Khartoum 2006.

**KEYWORD:** Arab World