

Rethinking Arab Summits

by Hilal Khashan - March 10, 2025

U.S. President Donald Trump's plan to take over Gaza and permanently resettle its residents sparked an uproar throughout the Arab world. In response, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi proposed an alternative plan to rebuild Gaza without displacing its population while denouncing the war waged against it. At an emergency summit of the Arab League in Cairo last week, Arab leaders unanimously endorsed el-Sissi's proposal and expressed their support for a unified approach to the issue. Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, for example, said he hoped Arab heads of state would implement the decisions made at the summit.

In reality, however, el-Sissi had another motive for organizing the gathering. After canceling his visit to Washington last month, he realized that, sooner or later, he would have to travel to the United States to talk to Trump about his resettlement plan for Gaza. El-Sissi knew he had to present an alternative proposal, one that was endorsed by other Arab leaders. The summit itself was therefore no more than an opportunity to rubberstamp a plan that most recognize as futile. It's a sign of the growing ineffectiveness of this format.

Tenuous Outcome

Trump's Gaza plan placed Arab leaders in a precarious position. It made them look weak in front of their own people because they know they cannot afford to antagonize the U.S. president by outwardly rejecting his proposal. At the same time, the displacement of Gaza's population is a highly sensitive issue in the Middle East. It would challenge the Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Treaty, signed by Arab states in 1950. Furthermore, the International Criminal Court could see the displacement of Gazans as a crime against humanity. Many observers commented that Arab countries should have taken more decisive positions on the matter than merely issuing generic recommendations. Seven Arab leaders chose not to attend the Cairo summit, even after it was postponed to fit their schedules. Notable absentees included Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Kuwaiti Emir Meshal Al Ahmad Al Jaber, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune and Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq. The absence of the leaders of some of the wealthiest Arab countries indicates their unwillingness to sign on to the Egyptian plan to avoid angering Trump.

Ultimately, the leaders who did attend failed to make actionable decisions, preferring instead to repeat perfunctory statements that fall short of directly criticizing Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who wants Saudi Arabia to establish a Palestinian state on its own territory. What Trump and Netanyahu may not understand is that accepting their demands will most certainly cause public anger in Egypt and Saudi Arabia that the regimes of these countries might not survive. In addition, el-Sissi and MBS view the Palestinian issue as a trojan horse that could plant revolutionary ideas among their own populations. In the 1950s, Palestinians who worked in the oil industry in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province supported communist and pan-Arab ideologies, which they disseminated to their Saudi, primarily Shiite, colleagues.

At the one-day summit last week, Arab leaders hoped to establish a security and political framework for Gaza that would empower the Palestinian Authority while remaining ambivalent about the fate of Hamas. They also rejected the idea of displacing Gaza's population and insisted on connecting the strip with the West Bank and achieving a two-state solution, despite Israel's continued rejection of Palestinian statehood. Still, the Egyptian plan touched on the issue of Hamas' military wing, linking its dismantling to removing the reason for its existence, i.e., Palestinian displacement since 1948. It highlighted the need to establish a credible political process to restore the historical rights of the Palestinian people. At the closing session, some called on the U.N. Security Council to deploy peacekeeping forces to Gaza and the West Bank.

Arab summits are often dominated by wishful thinking and unworkable solutions, and the meeting in Cairo was no exception. The final statement released at the conclusion of the meeting resembled the resolution passed following the Arab League summit in Morocco in 1982, stressing that peace is a strategic choice for the Arab states and based on a two-state solution. As the dominant power in the Middle East, Israel rejected the resolution at that time and won't accept a similar one now.

The U.S. also rejected the plan. A White House statement said it did not address the fact that Gaza is currently uninhabitable. The statement stressed that Trump will stick to his proposal to rebuild the strip and eliminate Hamas. Israel, meanwhile, said the summit's proposals failed to address the reality after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack and were tied to outdated visions.

History of Futility

The Palestinian issue has been the main, if not the only, focus of all Arab summits held since 1937. The first summit was held in Syria's mountain resort area of Bloudan in response to Arab anger after Britain released the Peel Commission report, which called for the partition of Palestine into two states, one Jewish and the other Arab. The second was held in 1946, a year after the Arab League's

founding, in the Egyptian village of Inshas. The participants included the seven independent Arab League countries at the time: Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The main topic was preventing the establishment of a Jewish state. The summit stressed the need to stand up to Zionism, viewing it as a danger that threatens not only Palestine but all Arab and Islamic countries. It also called for a complete halt to Jewish immigration to Palestinian-held land and stressed that any pro-Zionist U.S. and British policies would be considered an act of aggression toward all the countries of the Arab League. It called for providing the Palestinians with financial aid, though the grouping failed to introduce a mechanism for providing such support. Arab states were also still unwilling to supply Palestinians with weapons.

Arab states held a second summit in 1946 in Bloudan in response to Britain's decision to keep the door open to Jewish immigration to Palestine even after the period specified in the 1939 White Paper had expired. The meeting was announced amid widespread demonstrations throughout the Arab region. While Egypt was interested in negotiations with Britain to persuade it to evacuate its troops from the Suez Canal area, other Arab delegations were communicating with British intelligence officers in the Middle East to coordinate outcomes from the summit.

In 1956, Arab states held a summit in Beirut to express support for Egypt in the Suez War and reserve the right to defend it if Israel, Britain and France refused to end the fighting. However, their verbal threats came only after Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmitri Shepilov sent strong letters to Britain and France, alluding to the possibility of taking military action against them. And both the Soviets and the Arabs issued strong statements only after U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower opposed the military campaign and demanded the evacuation of foreign troops from Egypt.

In 1964, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser called for an Arab summit in Cairo, which initiated the regular summits that continue to this day. Even though the gathering dealt with the Palestinian question, it was not focused on preparing for war against Israel. On the contrary, Nasser felt uncomfortable with the rise of the Fatah movement over its plans to launch guerrilla attacks against Israel, which he feared could drag Egypt into a conflict for which his army was not ready. He therefore announced the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization, as well as the Palestine Liberation Army, to recruit Palestinian youth and dissuade them from joining Fatah. Though Jordan and Lebanon refused to allow the formation of Palestinian armed units on their territories, Egypt, Syria and Iraq made joining the PLA compulsory for Palestinians living in their countries.

Questionable Future

The only decisive Arab summit to ever have taken place had nothing to do with the Palestinian question. It was held in Cairo on Aug. 10, 1990, in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak wanted to make clear that Arab diplomacy could not convince Iraq to pull its army out of Kuwait. Without unanimous support from participant countries, which is traditionally required when joint decisions are reached, the Arab League released a final statement condemning Iraq's actions and inviting the U.S. to lead a coalition to liberate Kuwait. However, three days before the summit, U.S. troops had already started arriving in Saudi Arabia, and one day afterward, Egyptian and Syrian soldiers began landing there.

In 1969, an emergency Arab summit was held in the Moroccan capital of Rabat to address an arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque. But Arab leaders could not agree on how to approach the matter, even before discussions on a final decision or statement. Following the debacle, a famous Syrian poet described Arab leaders as liars who get angry when asked to implement a decision they made and run away in times of hardship, betray their friends and disgrace their people. Heads of state often do not attend the summits, allegedly due to medical conditions or other engagements. In the 2019 economic summit in Beirut, focused on setting up an Arab customs union, the only head of state to attend was the emir of Qatar, who departed after the inaugural session.

Many observers have argued for an end to Arab summits, viewing them as meaningless and incapable of bridging the large divide between Arab states. Last week's summit in Cairo was merely the most recent indicator of their inability to solve the region's many problems.

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