

Strong Peace Offer Reveals Weak Governments

Arab Summit in Shambles

The Summit vs. the Streets

Arab States, Arab Streets: Why the Summit is a Sham

Rarely has so much attention been given to a meeting of the Arab League. This loose confederation of 22 Arab states is already beginning to gather in Beirut to consider, among other things, a Saudi peace initiative for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hopes are high that this diverse group of nations will come to a cohesive position on recognizing Israel's right-to-exist and offer peace conditions that can help Israelis and Palestinians stop killing each other. Unfortunately, not only are these hopes likely to be dashed, but they prevent policy-makers and the press from seeing the truth among the talk. For that, one must look to the Arab streets, not to the Arab summit.

What the Arab streets reveal is that the Arab summit is merely a cover for weak Arab states to make a strong Arab peace proposal that will not work, and, what's more, will jeopardize the very regimes that support it. This cover is necessary because the Arab states realize they are too weak to fulfill the demands of the people in their streets. Thus, in making this proposal, these Arab states run the risk of distancing themselves even further from their people, thereby endangering their legitimacy and security. In short, the Arab states are stuck. They are incapable of removing Israel through war, yet this is what their people want. They are incapable of offering peace, yet this is what their leaders want. So what do they do? They hold a summit.

Yet problems abound. The sentiment in the Arab streets against peace with or recognition of Israel is strong. Look at the recent outbreaks of public resistance over the last month: a thousand demonstrators in Algiers; several thousand in Beirut and Cairo; 10,000 demonstrators in Damascus; and a million demonstrators in Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. And all this resistance is emerging against the mere idea of granting any peace or recognition to Israel. The Arab masses are completely against normalization with Israel.

The summit itself is basically in shambles as well. Heads of state from at least 10 of the 22 Arab League members are not expected to show up. Some of the most important players - Arafat, Mubarak, Qaddafi, and Hussein - will be elsewhere. Kuwait, UAE, Oman, Sudan, and Mauritania will be represented only by lower-level officials. These are not the conditions under which a "league" drafts a lasting and binding peace proposal.

By offering peace to Israel in this ineffectual and desperate manner, the Arab governments are showing to Israel and their respective populaces how weak, inefficient and ineffective they have become. Although Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah's initiative is motivated by a desire for peace and the long-term health of the region, it also demonstrates that for Abdallah and other Arab leaders to come to the help of the Palestinians, they have had to accept the obvious: Israel cannot be defeated militarily by the Arab world.

How have things gotten to this point? Unlike East Asia, which has developed significantly over the last 50 years, the Arab world remains a backwater of poverty, misery, and chronic fiscal mismanagement, allowing tyrants and military dictators to hold onto impoverishing power. Even those countries that have acquired some wealth and advancement, such as the oil-rich Gulf nations, are plagued with endemic public sector mismanagement and gross corruption that have sapped them of all potential for real economic health. Incessant governmental deficits, inordinately expensive and inept militaries and social policies, and nepotistic ruling bureaucracies have essentially frozen these countries in time. And the Arab rulers know that. This is why they are offering peace to Israel - to attempt to bring some normalcy to the region, to incite investment, to attempt to move forward. Even the Arab governments know that until there is peace in Israel they will not enjoy a complete involvement with the global economy.

The danger here is that these regimes, whose power is based on the appeasement, not the will, of the people, may become so out-of-touch that they will put themselves at risk. The only thing that can be done to allay this danger is that the rulers sell the idea of peace with Israel to the people. But is this likely to happen? Not any time soon. Because they have no mandate from the public, Arab leaders are inept at influencing public opinion.

In sum, the Arab summit reveals a central paradox for the nations that are participating (or not participating). Were these nations as strong as they pretend they are, they would not need this summit to offer peace to Israel, a country that none of them dares attack. Thus, by offering such peace they reveal their weakness. What's more, the corrupt authoritarian economically-crippled regimes that are making the offer of peace are merely jeopardizing their very existence through the gesture, as the closer they come to recognizing Israel, the closer they come to revolution within their borders. The problem is anti-Israeli sentiment in the Arab streets, not differences of elitist opinion at the Arab summit. Until the former is addressed and altered, the latter is likely to prove futile and even dangerous.