



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

March 26, 2009

Regulating Arab Politics (Part I): The War of the Summits

Joseph Kostiner

Two Arab summits with conflicting purposes convened during the recent Gaza war. The first took place in Doha, Qatar, on January 15-16, the second in Kuwait, on January 19-20. The conflict sparked by these conferences was titled “the war of the summits” (harb al-qimmam) by the Arab media. Analyses of the conflict generally spoke of the rivalry between “radical” and “moderate” camps in the Arab world. Accordingly, the Doha summit was representative of the interests of the “radical” camp, while the Kuwait summit was representative of those of the “moderates”, led by Presidents Mubarak of Egypt and Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. All three refused to attend the Doha summit, whose main attraction was the appearance of Hamas’s leader Khalid Mash`al. Mash`al used the Doha platform to declare victory in the fighting with Israel and lay out Hamas’s main demands, particularly the opening of the crossings between Israel and the Gaza Strip as well as the Rafah crossing linking Egypt and Gaza. Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, in the same militant tone, declared that the 2002 “Arab peace initiative” towards Israel had ceased to exist. The presence of Iranian president Mahmud Ahmedinajad as an observer solidified the radical spirit of the conference. The Kuwait summit, by contrast, was a pre-planned Arab League gathering, focusing on economic development and on the Palestinian situation in Gaza. Unlike at

Doha, all Arab leaders participated in this summit, pledging sympathy and assistance to the Palestinians. PA President Abbas attended as the legitimate leader of the Palestinians, without a Hamas presence in the Palestinian delegation.

This conventional, “radicals” versus “moderates” analysis requires further examination of the specific and nuanced positions of individual Arab states. As there are no major leaders of the overall Arab system, inter-Arab politics in recent years have been characterized by regional coordinators and power-brokers, working primarily behind the scenes. Hence, the conflict generated by the two summits can be viewed as a contest among Arab mediators.

For years, Saudi Arabia has played the role of major regional coordinator. Its achievements included the brokering of the 1989 Ta'if agreement between the feuding Lebanese factions, and the Saudi-generated 2002 “Arab peace initiative”, which was reconfirmed by the 2007 Arab summit conference in Riyadh. That same year, the Saudis undertook an ambitious attempt to cope with the implications of Iran’s regional ascendancy. They sought simultaneously to establish a dialogue with the Iranian president and, at the same time, contain Iran’s growing influence in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Their attempts in Lebanon and Palestine failed, ultimately contributing to Hamas’s crackdown on the rival, PA-affiliated Fatah movement in Gaza, in June 2007. Hence, the Saudi Kingdom, which had brokered a Hamas-Fatah agreement just months earlier and thus temporarily reinforced its standing as the main conflict regulator, failed to live up to regional expectations. Furthermore, it was relegated to being merely a spectator in the US-sponsored Palestinian-Israeli Annapolis conference of December 2007.

Other regional parties then made their bids to fill the vacuum left by Saudi limitations. Qatar, despite its small geographical footprint and population, cultivated its own position as a regional mediator. Bordering Saudi Arabia to the west and south, and Iranian waters to the east, Qatar has for some years energetically sought to pursue autonomous regional policies. They have juggled between developing friendly relations with Iran, hosting US

regional military headquarters and cooperating with other Gulf states. Opening low-level diplomatic relations with Israel in 1995 was a prime example of Qatar's unconventional foreign policy, as was the call made by Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hamad bin-Jasim for Lebanon to negotiate a peace agreement with Israel, following the 2006 war. Likewise, in May 2008, Qatar brokered the agreement, favorable to Hizbullah, between rival Lebanese factions which brought an end to the extended political crisis there. Following this mediation, Qatar further strengthened its ties with both Iran and the Hizbullah movement.

Egyptian leaders, for their part, felt that the regional power vacuum left by the Saudis had granted them a new lease on life, namely, an opportunity to regain their traditional influence in the region. During the last year, Egypt strengthened its standing by simultaneously mediating a calm between Fatah and Hamas as well as a tahdi'a (lit. "calming"), between Israel and Hamas, and continuously engaged the parties in an effort, not yet consummated, to broker an Israeli-Hamas prisoner exchange. Egypt's head of intelligence, Omar Suleiman, was instrumental in solidifying this role, affording Egypt undisputed trust by both Hamas and Israel. These activities conferred a unique role on Egypt, which no other party in the Arab world could fill.

Given this regional flux and competition, the Gaza war stimulated a rivalry among competing mediators. Qatar made the first bid by convening the summit in Doha. For Qatar, the summit was an opportunity to demonstrate that despite its existing diplomatic ties with Israel, it remained deeply sympathetic to the Palestinians. The summit also provided an opportunity to strengthen relations with Iran, an important patron of Hamas. Qatari officials later explained that they had in fact invited President Abbas to attend the conference; however, since he had refused, they stated, they were forced to turn to the "head of the resistance", Khalid Mash'al. Qatari leaders rejected the accusation that they had deepened the rift in Arab ranks, while insisting that reliance on the U.N. Security Council or the upcoming Arab League Kuwait summit to take action on behalf of the Palestinians would have been both too little and too late. It seems that the Qataris were overconfident, and even possessed by a measure of hubris regarding "their" summit.

It was, however, Saudi Arabia which grabbed the diplomatic reins in subsequent days. In an unexpected move at the Kuwait summit, King Abdullah refrained from criticizing Qatar and the “radicals”, instead delivering a speech emphasizing the need to achieve renewed Arab solidarity and coordination. Through meetings on the sidelines of the summit, Abdallah was able to repair Saudi Arabia’s damaged ties with Bashar al-Asad and the Qatari leadership. In doing so, the Saudis again took center stage as a chief regional coordinator and facilitator.

In previous years, Egypt would have seconded the Saudi position. However, this was not the case this time. Cairo must have feared Tehran’s projection of power into the Gaza Strip, on Egypt’s border. It was also concerned that Hamas’s militant activities might spillover into Egypt, via its parent Muslim Brotherhood organization. The Egyptians wanted to limit and contain Hamas’s ability to both smuggle arms into Gaza and to cross freely through Rafah into Egypt. From their viewpoint, the Doha conference was an attempt to delegitimize Egypt’s role vis-a-vis Hamas and produce a rift between the so-called “moderates” and “radicals”. For Egypt, Hamas’s boasts of victory against Israel while the Palestinian people were severely suffering were unacceptable. Only the Egyptian way, it insisted, would lead to regional calm. This view was supported by the International Quartet and Turkey. Hence, Egypt opposed the Doha summit as well as the Saudi attempt to ignore Qatar’s initiative and go back to promoting Arab unity. An Egyptian diplomat explained, “If the Saudis want to do it, namely reconcile between Syria and Qatar, they can, but we are not going to do so.” This meant that Egypt did not see eye to eye with Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that bilateral relations between them remained cordial.

In subsequent days, Qatar successfully mediated an agreement between the government and rebels in Darfur, Sudan. Egypt continued its intensive mediation between Fatah and Hamas, and Israel and Hamas. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has become more involved with promoting regional coordination. Relations with Syria have improved, illustrated by King Abdullah’s invitation to Bashar al-Asad to visit Riyadh. Saudi Arabia wishes to turn the

"Arab peace initiative" into a blueprint for the new Obama Administration's Middle East policy. Thus, the "war of the summits" was, in fact, the opening act in what promised to be an intricate series of diplomatic moves and further inter-Arab mediation efforts, which would surely affect regional developments in the coming weeks and months.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation