

Summit stakes

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Coming to the fore in Damascus, the dilemma Arab leaders face is between making sacrifices and being sacrificed, writes **Gamil Mattar***

Times have changed for Arab summits. Balances of power have shifted, some political ideologies have waned and others have waxed, and new government policies and positions are at work. Even the US, which had once cautioned against Arab summits and campaigned to get them postponed or even cancelled, now practically looks forward to them and eagerly offers ideas and advice.

In the past, the Arab League was a podium upon which Arab leaders would vie in the vehemence of their declarations of opposition to colonialism and the Zionist occupation and alliance with foreign powers, be they Eastern or Western. Not infrequently, some Arab officials would apologise in advance to foreign diplomatic representatives for what they were about to proclaim from the Arab League podium. But at least the League's minutes and the history of collective Arab work testify to the fact that no Arab leader has ever used that forum to declare a stance that would offend the sensitivities of the majority of the Arab people.

One remarkable feature of recent years is the way American politicians would regularly and repeatedly seek out "influential" officials in Arab capitals in advance of an Arab summit. From all indications, their purpose was to persuade these officials to avoid adopting certain resolutions or, if that could not be helped, to lighten their tone and make such resolutions "balanced". Then, if persuasion didn't work, pressure would be applied.

So a certain polarisation crept into the official Arab political scene, a polarisation arising from conceptual fiddling. I've heard it said in Arab capitals that to the Americans, these days, the Arabs fall into two categories. The first consists of religious extremists who have declared jihad against the West, freedom fighters engaged in legitimate resistance against military occupation or foreign domination, and protesters against Israeli aggressions against the Palestinians, Zionist expansionism and increasing Jewish intervention in regional and international affairs. In this category, too, fall those who advocate stronger Arab relations with the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China).

The other category, in the prevailing opinion in Washington, consists of those who unabashedly toe the American policy line and implement the dictates of America's economic ideology and privatise whatever they can on and below the ground, leaving nothing for their countries and their peoples for the years of drought.

This categorisation has done no small injustice to many Arab politicians and intellectuals who were awarded the label "moderate" and lumped together in a pact called the "moderate alliance". In the opinion of those American think tanks that are steeped in neo-conservative ideology, hatred for the Arabs, and unswerving loyalty to Israel, Arab moderates are those who don't make a fuss at the dissolution of Arab countries so long as those countries are not their own. This is the thinking behind opinions and statements urging these Arabs to support

with their silence the Ethiopian occupation of Somalia, the "civilised" world's occupation of Darfur, and the current process of dismantling Comoros (which is a member of the Arab League, for those who had not known this fact).

These Arabs are also being asked to stand by and watch as Sudan is torn apart between southerners and northerners and between east and west, and to keep their opinions to themselves on all the scheming and manoeuvring that is currently in progress to build a high dam stretching from the "New Horn of Africa" to Africa's Atlantic shore. In addition, these "moderates" are further being told to stop being so dovish about Iran and to sign up to the multifaceted and gradually escalating confrontation against Tehran. In this regard, some Americans are whispering a word of advice in the ears of Arab officials: "positive" change in Arab policies towards Iran will be looked upon by Israel as the "last" concrete proof it needs of Arab "good intentions".

Naturally, those American politicians want "moderate" Arab rhetoric to be reflected in the resolutions and statements coming out of the Arab summit. So, they are telling the "moderates", no outcries about the economic stranglehold and starvation of an Arab people in Gaza; no demands for a halt to the massacres by NATO forces in Afghan villages or to the bombardment of Somali villages; and no declarations that the Arabs (of both sorts) are becoming less and less able to tolerate Israel's insults and transgressions and Western support of these, and ever more inclined to threaten rejecting a two-state project on the remains and ruins of Palestine. There must be nothing of this sort in the Arab summit statement, or if public opinion has to be appeased, at least keep the tone down.

In a recent conference I attended on the future of the international order, I happened to be sitting next to a woman whose politics I can say for certain are moderate, sensible and realistic. Throughout the conference she seemed obsessed with a single subject, which she called "moderation that has run out of patience, and moderates who've lost the incentive to be moderate". In defence of this position, she asked whether the Latin American summit that was held in Santo Domingo recently was "terrorist" and "extremist" because it took up the call of Latin American moderates and appealed to the US to stop meddling in the domestic affairs of the countries of that continent. They didn't proclaim war against the US or any other country; they didn't call for a boycott or a severing of relations with the US; and they didn't forge an anti-US alliance. All they did was to make it known that their response to US policies was to accelerate their plans for economic integration and cooperation.

The woman went on to say that Latin American moderates suspect parties outside of their continent to deploy the divide- and-conquer method to bring to heel "hard-line" governments, which is to say those that have chosen an alternative path towards economic growth. Isn't China moderate, in fact the epitome of moderation, she asked. Yet the West, led by the US, pounced on it and attempted to encroach on its territorial integrity to punish it for having persevered on the path to growth and development. Then she said, "I'm afraid that the Arab region has been targeted for the next phase of Balkanisation, and it has already begun in Somalia, Sudan and in Iraq, and will threaten other Arab countries before moving to Pakistan and Iran."

I hope Arab leaders reject the notion of a "moderate alliance" as Washington envisions it, not only because it sets Arab governments against each other, which was the objective of British and French colonialist strategy not all that long ago, but also because the idea is being aired at a time of deepening social, political and religious crises that will not be alleviated by fanning

yet another axis of polarisation, this one between hard-liners, most of whom are quite moderate in many respects, and moderates, most of whom are quite fanatic in many respects.

Despite the inroads that have already been made in implanting this concept in the Arab political body, I still can not picture an Arab summit statement that does not call for "the need to make a clear distinction between terrorism and a people's right to resist foreign occupation, whether out of opposition to the occupation or in self defence," and that does not support "the right of the Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian and other Arab peoples to resist Israel's occupation, continuous threat of aggression and campaigns to incite the countries of the world against the Arab and Muslim people." (The latter is, also, a form of aggression and has, in fact, succeeded in putting all Arabs without exception permanently on the defensive). Nor can I imagine a statement issuing from the summit that does not include a point or some reference to "the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes".

At the same time, it is not difficult to picture the scale of US pressure for the inclusion in the summit statement of a point that distances the Arab position from Iran, ostensibly in deference to the international community and the UN Security Council, but really because this is what the US and Israel want. I have no doubt that Washington's insistence on such a point will encourage some Arab heads of state to cancel their plans to attend the summit, pleading preoccupation with other concerns. Perhaps, too, the conference will come up with two conflicting statements in this regard: one in which some Arab leaders express their concerns about Iran, thereby appeasing international and regional powers and keeping harm at arm's length, for the time being at least, and a second statement cautioning against the danger of the disintegration of the Islamic nation and calling for a halt to the chain of abuses of the rights of the Arab nation.

The forthcoming days will test the capacities of Arab diplomacy, especially that of Syria in its capacity as host country. Political analysts have no doubt about the aim of Syrian diplomacy at this critical phase. It is to sustain the efficacy of the Syrian role in the Arab order, and it will be a difficult, if not impossible aim, to achieve if Damascus disregards the current state of the Arab world or handles it with an attitude of moral superiority. It will also be a hard objective to accomplish if the only consensus that comes out of the summit in Syria is that the fact that the summit was held constitutes an "accomplishment" for the Arab nation in view of enormous international and regional complexities. Or, similarly, it may occur to some Syrians and "moderates" to promote the notion that the very fact that the summit got off the ground finally dispels that shadow of suspicion that had hung over Damascus as the shoal upon which the principle of regularly scheduled summits always ran aground.

In other words, Syrian diplomacy, with the help of some others, will simply try to arrange things so that they can ultimately emerge from the summit intact and with some reasonable results in hand, in the hope of forestalling the emergence of a dangerous vacuum in Lebanon or elsewhere, like the vacuum that occurred in Iraq, with all its horrifying consequences.

It is no secret that the subject of many confidential admissions and closed-door discussions has to do with the dangerous dilemma in which many parties find themselves -- the dilemma of having to choose between making sacrifices and being sacrificed. No Arab leader wants either, but they are under constant and mounting threats, and commentators and politicians are wrong to underestimate how dangerous this dilemma is. But it is also wrong, and more dangerous, to pretend that political realism compels Arab countries to offer concessions on fundamental rights and principles in order to avoid fragmentation or dissolution. This kind of

sacrifice is a bottomless pit and the fastest route to disintegration. The Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Somalia, Sudan and a few phases of the Palestinian revolution offer eloquent proof.

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