

What Arabs Can Accomplish in Tunis/ Opportunities for Leadership in Tunis

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When Arab leaders gather in Tunis for this year's Arab League summit, they will face a number of daunting problems for which there are no quick or easy solutions. With Abu Ghraib, Gaza, and the Greater Middle East Initiative on the agenda, they will have much to discuss. But can their deliberations really make a difference?

Before rushing to answer this question, let us first be clear about constraints. Historically, Arab states have been more disunited than united. The interests of ruling elites have diverged, and the policies of foreign powers such as the United States have fostered division. These facts are undeniable. Moreover, the present situation is incredibly demoralizing. America's hypocrisy in Iraq has only deepened Arab humiliation in the face of foreign dominance and domestic misrule, providing evidence of what astute Arab thinkers have long suspected: democracy and free market economy are being used to advance American hegemony, and not vice versa. By indiscriminantly labeling all who oppose them as "terrorists" and writing off civilian casualties as "collateral damage," the Bush and Sharon administrations have turned Arab and Islamic lands into happy hunting grounds.

So what is the point of another Arab summit? Should Arab leaders even bother?

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Arabs are not powerless. They cannot accomplish their most important objectives without cooperation from the outside world, but there is much that they can achieve by working together and refining their message for the international community. For best results, Arabs need to focus on those aspects of their destiny over which they have greatest control.

Here are some of the ways that Arab leaders can take advantage of the opportunities that will present themselves in Tunis:

*Rather than wait passively for President Bush to announce his Greater Middle East Initiative at the upcoming G-8 summit, Arab leaders should agree to appropriate the reform agenda in a way that serves genuine Arab interests. Rather than speaking disingenuously about reform to legitimize failing regimes or reduce foreign pressure, Arab leaders should recognize that more democratic, equitable, and economically dynamic Arab countries will have much greater stature in the international community. At present, Arab governments have extremely limited capability to project moral authority and political influence beyond their own boundaries. They have no moral standing, and are not taken seriously. By taking concrete measures to protect human rights, open political space, and combat corruption, they can become more influential and effective. They will be in a significantly better position to negotiate on behalf of Palestinians, Iraqis, and their own people.

*While calling for an end to home demolitions and violence against civilians in Rafah, Arab leaders should avoid rhetoric that might be misused by political adversaries. Under no conditions should they allow detractors to distort their principled positions on the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Syrian conflicts. Arabs continue to adhere to UN resolutions and are fully committed to the “land for peace” formula. The Arab people are motivated by compassion for Palestinians rather than by hatred of Israelis, and earnestly long for a just peace.

*Arab leaders should remind the West that a just peace between Arabs and Israelis is absolutely essential if the cause of reform is to succeed. Without peace, reforms will be half-hearted and populations will be restive. Traditional security issues will dominate the regional agenda, and foreign efforts to promote liberalization will be viewed with deep distrust. A fair and comprehensive peace, however, will generate new hope throughout the Middle East, together with unstoppable demands for political participation, good governance, and economic opportunity.

*With respect to ongoing strife between Israelis and Palestinians, Arabs should call for an end to the cycle of violence created by occupation and asymmetrical warfare. By condemning both state terrorism and non-state terrorism, Arab leaders can demonstrate their understanding that not all actions taken for just causes like Palestinian liberation are inherently just. At the same time, they can remind the world that states are the worse abusers of human rights than non-state and stateless movements. By respecting individual as well as collective human rights and supporting weaker parties in asymmetrical negotiations, much can be done to prevent non-state terrorism.

*For the time being, Arab leaders have to deal with the fact that Americans are present in Iraq. Arabs should, however, call for a cessation of violence by all armed groups and a credible plan for American withdrawal. With respect to Abu Ghraib, they should call upon Americans to practice restorative justice by offering public apologies to families of those who were abused, together with significant financial compensation. Officials responsible for abuses committed by soldiers should not escape accountability.

*Arab governments should recognize that leaders of Iraqi parties and social groups have not ceased to represent their society by cooperating with the American occupation. Arab governments should express willingness to begin their own conversations with Iraqi political and civil society leaders, and support their aspirations for an independent, secure, and democratic Iraq – an Iraq that will be free from both foreign occupation and domestic tyranny.

These are but a few of the many opportunities for Arab leadership. Though consensus is likely to be elusive, the issues are urgent. When Arabs make independent and creative decisions about their own future, Washington and Tel Aviv will find that it is much more costly to impose decisions.

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