

The Baghdad Summit

Interpreting the Significance of the Time, the Place and the Discourse

by Imad Rahaima
Baghdad, June 1st

The emergency Arab summit in Baghdad is over, but its effects are not, for the summit was exceptional not only in terms of the Arab League's rules, but also due to other factors which are related to the time and place it was held, and its packed agenda. It was also unusual by virtue of the debate and clamor that accompanied and preceded it. In fact, the very convening of this summit was in question right down to when the plenary session actually opened. It was uncertain whether or not a quorum could be achieved, due to Syrian objections to the site of the summit. The question of where a summit was to be held has never had so many political connotations as was the case with this one. The shift in the leadership of the Arab world, implied by holding the summit in Baghdad, was far from satisfactory to a number of regional and international forces.

The significance of the place

«Why in Baghdad?» and «Why not in Baghdad?» - this dual question sums up all the inter-Arab contradictions that accompanied and preceded the summit. On the one hand, it symbolizes the differences between the two political currents which dominated the summit. On the other hand, it reveals the depth and seriousness of the supposedly secondary Arab contradictions which the intensive mediation efforts of recent months could not dispell.

Those who supported the convening of the summit in Baghdad view this city as a symbol of Arab steadfastness and victory in the Gulf war. They believe that Iraqi power enables the Arabs to formulate a comprehensive confrontation strategy that does not exclude the military option. They argued that the summit had to be convened in Baghdad to show solidarity with Iraq in the face of the US-Israeli-British campaign, to show that Iraq

was not alone, but that the Arabs were backing its right to possess developed technology for peaceful and defensive purposes.

The opponents and semi-opponents of convening this summit in Baghdad had a different point of departure. They have different views, different considerations and different interests. First of all, there is Damascus that from the beginning expressed its rejection of the place of the summit, publicly and clearly. The Syrian leadership added that the preparations were not sufficient for this summit, so the results would not meet the challenges facing the Arab world. Syria's absence revealed the depth of the so-called secondary contradictions between Damascus and Baghdad.

Almost all observers were sure in advance that Syria would not attend; yet hope remained that the Syrian leadership would change its mind at the last minute. This hope lingered even in the first half hour of the opening session, for Colonel Qaddafi of Libya was in Damascus, and had dispatched a special envoy to Baghdad the night before. Rumors spread about Syria joining the summit; pictures of President Assad were put up in Baghdad, and there was a commotion in the suite of Al Rashid hotel where the Syrian delegation was to stay. Though it was known for sure that President Assad would not attend, there was still a small hope that Syria would be represented, for how else would it be possible to discuss the issues of pan-Arab security, the Arab-Israeli conflict and Lebanon? Even those with the most reservations consider Damascus to be a major player in all these fields.

As the Libyan leader arrived in Baghdad, rumors spread that he had brought a Syrian delegation headed by Foreign Minister Shara, but the rumors faded and the Syrian seat remained vacant.

Lebanon was the second opponent of convening the summit in Baghdad.

Of course, nobody at the summit really cared what the Lebanese officials said to justify their absence. Still, Lebanon's official absence did not prevent the Lebanese issue from being discussed. Resolutions were adopted which were welcomed by Lebanon's President Hrawi, Prime Minister Hoss and Speaker of Parliament Husseini.

Three other Arab heads of state did not attend, but sent high-ranking deputies in their place. The first of these was King Hassan II, who hates to attend any summit that he does not host himself (7 out of 19 past Arab summits were held in Morocco). The second of the absentees was Sultan Qabus of Oman, who dislikes by nature to attend such events. The third absentee was President Shadli Ben Jedid of Algeria. His absence left a significant moral void in view of his and Algeria's outstanding role in past efforts to achieve Arab solidarity and reconcile inter-Arab disputes. The unconvincing reasons given for Ben Jedid's absence also had an influence on the summit; many questions were raised about the real motivation for the Algerian decision.

Among those states that had reservations about the site of the summit, and expressed their dissatisfaction ambiguously, the most prominent were Egypt and Saudi Arabia that most probably share the same reasons for their attitude. Neither are willing to recognize Iraq's growing role in the region. Both fear that Iraq's military, scientific, economic and human resources will come to outweigh their own particular political functions. Saudi Arabia, for its part, is accustomed to dominating the Arab scene especially in the 70s and the 80s. Egypt, newly readmitted to the Arab League, is trying to restore the role it lost during the years of its enforced absence following Sadat's visit to occupied Jerusalem and the signing of the Camp David accords.

These two states have their own political line and style which differ ►