

U.S. 'Reform' Sabotages Arab League Summit

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The Arab League, representing the 22 governments of the Arab world, was hit by a bombshell on the eve of its March 29-30 summit in Tunis. Not a terrorist attack, but an event with potentially comparable consequences occurred. For the first time in the organization's 57-year history, the summit was called off—or rather, postponed—during final preparations. Arab League General Secretary Amr Mussa warned that the postponement would have “dangerous consequences for joint Arab action.” He added, “The situation is serious and immediate action must be taken.”

Although Mussa took care to say that all Arab countries shared the responsibility for the postponement, the decision had been made unilaterally by the summit's host, Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. The Middle East News Agency (MENA) reported that after the Tunisian foreign minister “surprised” the other foreign ministers with the announcement on March 28, they had sought a meeting with Ben Ali, but in vain. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak did not mince words in his criticism of the Tunisian President. Expressing “astonishment and regret,” Mubarak was quoted by Middle East News Agency, “There is no justification . . . [for] the delay of the summit and for a party to impose its view unilaterally without consulting the others.” Mubarak said he had acted “to save the situation” by calling that same day for the summit to be convened as soon as possible and offering Cairo as a venue.

Mubarak met March 29 with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, after Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz had made known that he supported Egypt's effort to host a new summit. Mubarak met also with Amr Mussa and other Arab leaders eager to save the summit—reportedly, within three to seven weeks.

Whatever the mechanics of the March 28 events, the underlying dynamic became clear in background discussions with Arab diplomats and regional experts, and was reflected in the Arabic press. It was through U.S. intervention that the crisis erupted. Well-informed sources said Washington was demanding that the summit's agenda focus on a “reform” package which the State Department has been pushing, rather than on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has escalated in the wake of Israel's assassination of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Yassin. There was even an American “proposed resolution,” condemning violence against Israelis, and promoting a “political” solution. A predictable, strong condemnation of

Israel's assassination of Sheikh Yassin, was reportedly not desired by Washington. One account said that Ben Ali refused to receive the Palestinian delegation, due to the presence of Hamas personnel.

Reform, or Regime Change

The push for an Arab League summit dominated by “reforms,” began after Secretary of State Colin Powell announced his Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI), to spread democracy through the region. The blueprint for political, social, and economic reforms was touted as radically changing state structures in an area embracing the Arab world, Turkey, Israel, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. Significantly, the draft proposal, which the United States planned to highlight at the June G-8 summit, was circulated to the G-8 governments, but not to the intended victims!

Even before a draft was leaked by the London-based Arabic daily *Al Hayat* in February, Arab leaders reacted to the news of the GMEI with alarm. Evidently drawing the lessons of the State Department's “reform” agendas elsewhere in the world, especially in eastern Europe, Mubarak and his Saudi and Syrian counterparts realized that this agenda was a recipe for regime change—not by wars, but by “reforms.” After having received a visit from Marc Grossman of the State Department, who assured the Egyptians that nothing would be imposed on them, the Egyptian government shifted its stance, from outright rejection of the U.S. approach, to a proposed Arab initiative, rendering the U.S. draft superfluous. Essentially, the Arab leader was saying: If you want us to reform, fine, but we shall do so as we see fit. In discussions with other Arab League representatives, the Egyptians pulled together an initiative, to reform “from within.” This was the summit's top scheduled agenda item.

At a meeting on March 3, as reported by the Egyptian Information Service, “The Arab Foreign Ministers expressed support for the Egyptian initiative on democracy and reforms in the Arab countries. During their session . . . the ministers said that no country objected to the Egyptian initiative, stressing the importance of introducing reforms from inside the Arab world. Discussions on the reform idea started after Egypt presented its initiative to the participants who also probed the American and European ideas to spread democracy.” Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher said that the final text of a draft on the reform of the Arab League, to be forwarded to Arab heads of state, had been unanimously approved. Thus it was not only Arab governments, but also the Arab League itself that was to be subjected to reform. The March 3 chairman, Moroccan Foreign Minister Mohamed bin Eissa, stated in a joint press conference with Amr Mussa, “The proposals presented to reform the Arab League and modernize the Arab world will be submitted to the upcoming Arab Summit in Tunisia later this month and will not be made public until they are endorsed by Arab leaders.” At the meeting, “initial agreement on the revisions to the Arab Charter

for Human Rights” had reportedly been reached.

Agreement may have been reached formally, but, according to well-informed sources, not in substance. Host Ben Ali, who had just paid a visit to the United States, reportedly was planning to present himself as a model student at the summit, with a pitch for radical democratization. (How this was to work is a mystery, given Tunisia’s anything-but-democratic structures.)

In addition, since the assassination of Sheikh Yassin had already de facto redefined any agenda for such a gathering, it is clear that a strong denunciation of Israel’s targeted killing and other illegal policies would be forthcoming. Another burning issue: Iraq, whose sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence had been reaffirmed in the Arab League’s preparatory meetings. At the March 3-4 talks, “The council also called upon Arab countries to assist Iraq and stand in the face of attempts to spread ethnic sedition; affirmed the unity of Iraq and its people, as well as respecting its sovereignty and independence and non-interference with its internal affairs.” Meanwhile American circles were calling for the Arabs to condemn “violence against Israel,” and continue to tolerate the occupation of Iraq.

Reform, As Economic Looting

The opposition from Mubarak, and his counterparts in Syria and Saudi Arabia in particular, was so strong that reportedly the State Department had to shelve its Greater Middle East Initiative, putting it on the back burner temporarily.

In February, *Al Hayat* leaked the document, sparking the protests. Although it opens with discussion of measures to be taken on the political plane—expanding human rights, women’s rights, ensuring democracy through a free press and Western-style elections—the most pernicious part deals with the real issue of economic looting. The document is a blueprint for wholesale takeover of the resources, especially financial, of the region, and opening up its still largely dirigistic economies to large-scale foreign exploitation.

To appreciate the thrust of the proposal, and why it was being kept secret, consider the following quotes, from a preliminary translation from the Arabic: the “real problem is with the economy, as the United Nations Development Programme study on the Arab world showed, and therefore we must enhance economic opportunities. To bridge the gap [among] the Greater Middle East (GME) economies (which include the Arab world, plus Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and Israel), requires an economic shift similar in scope to that implemented for the former communist Eastern Europe. The aim is to free the potentials of the private sector in the region, particularly small and medium industry, which makes up the driving force of economic development and employment. Also the development of the professional class in the business sector is an important element in democracy and freedom.”

The G-8 is asked to adopt the following steps, under an Initiative for Financing Growth:

- Finance small projects through the World Bank—\$500 million is mentioned—especially projects for women.

- Create GME financial institutions which would work on the model of international financial institutions, to help the development of small and medium business projects to promote the further integration of the business sector. This “should be led by a group of leaders of the private sector of the G-8, who would provide their expertise”—not by the countries themselves.

- Consider a GME Development Bank: The G-8 and creditors from the GME could establish an institution similar to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, to provide the countries which are willing to make reforms, with basic development needs. Resources should come from “the richest countries of the region”—i.e., the oil-producing giants—and go to education, healthcare, basic infrastructure projects. Imitating International Monetary Fund conditionalities, “Decisions to give credit to countries should be linked to their ability to implement real reforms.”

- Form a “partnership for a better financial system. . . . In order to reform the financial services in the region and enhance the integration of these countries into the international financial system, the G-8 has the capacity to offer its participation in processes of reforming the financial systems of the advanced countries of the region. The purpose of this participation is to liberate financial services, by giving financial and technical advice.” This means making financial resources of the region available for propping up the “international financial system,” which is on its last legs. Concretely, the document outlines five foci: “1) implementing reform plans which would reduce the control of the State over financial services; 2) removing all barriers imposed on financial transactions between countries; 3) modernizing banking services; 4) providing, improving, and expanding the financial instruments that support market economies; and, 5) establishing the organizational structures that support the liberating of financial services.”

Any Arab leader would immediately grasp the implications. Were, for example, radical reforms introduced, as proposed, to hold Western-style elections, with G-8 countries’ experts providing instruction and inspections, most current leaders would have reason to fear they would not be in office long. The recent case of Georgia, for example, where George Soros funded the ouster of the government, would make the method clear. And the economic and financial reforms are a recipe for outright takeover, again along the lines of the post-communist looting and devastation of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

When the Arab League does convene, it may assess the broader intentions of the “reformers.” Circulating among Arab intellectuals and press, is a declaration issued by Lyndon LaRouche, “How Must We Deal With the New Turn in This Worsening Crisis?” (*EIR*, April 2) precisely on the total strategic picture—and what to do about it.