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## Arab Summit fails to give hope

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It was one of the lowest profile summits the Arab League has held since it was formed in the 1940s, and certainly the least lacklustre since the 2000 resolution was adopted making the Arab Summit an annual convocation.

Five Arab leaders — the heads of Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, Sudan and Comoros — were in the capital of Mauritania for the six-hour summit. They had generously provided Nouakchott with the financial help necessary to host what is supposed to be the highest Arab gathering. Mauritania was holding the meeting in place of Morocco which announced its decision to forego its turn chairing of the summit earlier this year, issuing a statement that said regional circumstances made it impossible for Arab leaders to adopt any resolutions that might change the complicated and confused Arab scene for the better. According to summit rules the chair passes alphabetically.

The king of Morocco absented himself from the meeting being held in neighbouring Mauritania as did the Saudi monarch, currently on his annual retreat in Morocco. The latter was absent despite a public statement by new Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Abul-Gheit that King Salman would be attending.

Also absent from the summit, to the surprise of the host and the secretariat of the pan-Arab organisation, was President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi. Al-Sisi had been expected to make a brief appearance, if only to hand over the presidency of the summit to his Mauritanian counterpart.

On the eve of the summit, following a meeting between Al-Sisi and Prime Minister Sherif Ismail, Cairo announced that the president had delegated Ismail to head the Egyptian delegation. No official explanation of the absence of the outgoing chair of the Arab Summit was offered, though the independent daily Al-Masry Al-Youm reported rumours Al-Sisi absented himself because of information received about a possible assassination attempt.

“I don’t know anything about that. These are matters the security forces handle. What I do know is that the decision was made on political basis. The president felt the summit would not add much to the Arab political performance,” an informed Egyptian official told Al-Ahram Weekly on Monday.

There were three things Cairo had hoped from the summit — a collective push behind the proposal made by Al-Sisi a few weeks ago to revive the Palestinian-Israeli talks; a new push for the Egyptian proposal, endorsed by the last Arab Summit in Sharm El-Sheikh, to form a unified Arab military force and support for Cairo’s calls for greater Arab cooperation in facing the challenges posed by political Islamists.

Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukri had stressed during the summit’s preparatory ministerial meeting that there must be a strong and coordinated effort to face up to terror. Yet terror, Palestine, indeed almost every issue of substance, was all but ignored during the largely ceremonial gathering that did take place.

Arab diplomats, struggling to cast a positive spin, argue the meeting did send two clear messages, the first on the Palestinian cause, the second on Iran.

As far as Palestine is concerned the spin looks hopelessly optimistic given the summit did little beyond repeat the customary clichés about the need to give a chance to the Arab Peace Initiative,

on the table since 2002, and to the French Initiative that may, or may not, lead to an international peace conference in the autumn.

Tellingly, President Mahmoud Abbas opted to join other absent heads of state, a precedent for a Palestinian leader. Abbas excused himself from attending because of the death of an elderly family member.

“Clearly this was an excuse. Abu Mazen [Abbas] is frustrated. He felt he would not get anything out of the summit and would, most likely, be pressured to agree the joint Egyptian-Saudi demarche to start direct talks with Israel, initially on economic issues. He chose to opt out instead,” said an Arab League source.

A Palestinian diplomat says Cairo has tried to persuade Abbas to give a chance to the Egyptian-Saudi plan but the Palestinian leader was reluctant.

“I think we would rather stick for now for the French Initiative. For us it is the only game in town,” the Palestinian diplomat said.

While the Palestinian cause was the subject of the usual platitudes as the “leading concern for collective Arab diplomacy” nothing of significance was tabled in terms of financial aid or political support for the Palestinians.

“I think we are seeing accelerated Arab-Israeli cooperation willing to sacrifice Palestinian demands no matter how humble,” said the diplomat.

Yet according to Arab League sources Saudi Arabia, which most diplomats agree is now the Arab world’s leading force, also failed to secure its goals for the summit beyond securing the denunciation of Iran as a threat to Arab national security.

The Saudis failed to win a clear pronouncement from the Arab Summit excluding the regime of Bashar Al-Assad from any future political agreement in Syria. They also failed to secure direct praise for the Saudi war in Yemen.

In the words of another senior Arab diplomat, “it was Iran, not Israel, which was directly attacked by the Arab Summit.”

“It was a very frustrating scene, symptomatic of an ailing Arab League that is barely functioning in the midst of complex challenges that are left unattended,” says political analyst Hassan Nafaa.

The final communiqué and statements of Arab leaders didn’t even approach the real issues at stake — especially the volatile situations in Libya and Syria — noted commentator Gamil Matar.

One problem, says Nafaa, is that Saudi Arabia is failing to lead the Arab world in the direction Riyadh wants.

Analyst Abdallah Al-Senawi argues that one of the clearer messages that emerged “from the very pale Egyptian performance at the equally very pale Nouakchott summit” is that Egypt remains too overwhelmed with domestic issues to resume a leading position in the Arab world.

“The Egyptian proposal to reactivate Palestinian-Israeli negotiations received little serious attention from the Arab Summit, and the proposal made by Egypt last year, adopted by the Sharm El-Sheikh summit, to initiate a united Arab military force has been dropped,” said Al-Senawi.

According to Matar, given the challenges, it is almost a miracle the summit convened at all. That it did, he adds, begs the question of whether such meetings, however high the level, are enough to keep the body of collective Arab diplomacy alive.

“I am afraid we are talking about a de facto regional order in which enemies and priorities are very different from what they have been during the entire history of the Arab League,” Matar said.

Nafaa suggests the possibility of a collective Arab leadership emerging in which Egypt and Saudi Arabia share responsibilities though he is dubious about this working given the extent of the disagreements between Cairo and Riyadh over a host of pressing regional issues.

The secretariat of the Arab League had dubbed the Nouakchott gathering the summit of hope.

“I guess the only hope there is today is that they’ll be able to stop the Arab League from disintegrating completely. Frankly, that would be quite an achievement now,” quipped Al-Senawi.