

Riyadh Summit: A Missed Opportunity for Action on Palestine and Lebanon

Syeda Mamoona Rubab

The Extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit, held in Riyadh on November 11, 2024, took place against the backdrop of escalating Israeli violence against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

The situation, deemed genocidal by international bodies and human rights groups, demanded urgent action.

This summit marked a year since the previous emergency meeting in Riyadh, where Arab and Islamic leaders pledged collective efforts to address the Gaza situation and push for a peace process.

However, despite these declarations, violence has intensified. Civilian casualties in Gaza continue to rise, while Lebanon and Syria face increasing aggression. Israel's expansionist policies persist unabated. The situation, therefore, necessitated a unified, and actionable response.

Ahead of the summit, the Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI) issued a powerful call for action urging leaders across the Muslim world to move beyond rhetoric and take decisive measures against Israel's escalating violence in Palestine and broader aggression in the region.

IPI had then warned that without meaningful steps, the summit would risk being seen as another missed opportunity to counter Israel's actions.

IPI proposed several bold actions, including:

- Targeted Economic Sanctions: Implementing sanctions against Israel to pressure the government to halt aggressive policies.
- Diplomatic Marginalization: Building a coalition to limit Israel's participation in UN bodies, highlighting international disapproval.
- Humanitarian Relief: The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) leading a humanitarian flotilla to deliver aid directly to Gaza.
- Long-term Reconstruction: Muslim nations committing to a reconstruction plan for Gaza, emphasizing infrastructure development.

By taking these actions, IPI argued, the OIC could demonstrate its dedication to the Palestinian cause and show the world that the Muslim community stands firmly in defense of its most vulnerable populations.

IPI's proposals were rooted in the belief that tangible steps should be taken by OIC to maintain credibility and relevance.

THE OUTCOME:

Here are the key outcomes:

1. **Support for Palestinian Sovereignty:** Leaders reaffirmed the two-state solution on 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as Palestine's capital, rejecting any displacement of Palestinians or attempts to alter Jerusalem's identity.
2. **Condemnation of Israeli Actions:** The summit characterized Israeli actions in Gaza as genocide, calling for an international investigation, immediate ceasefire, and unimpeded humanitarian access to Gaza. Israel's tactics of siege and collective punishment were condemned as violations of international law.
3. **International Sanctions and Isolation:** Leaders urged the UN to suspend Israel's participation in certain bodies, pushed for ICC warrants against Israeli officials, and called for an international ban on weapons transfers to Israel.
4. **Refugee Rights and Right of Return:** The summit emphasized the Palestinian right to return and compensation as outlined in UN Resolution 194, rejecting any compromise on these rights.
5. **Protection of Religious Sites:** Al-Aqsa Mosque was declared a Muslim site exclusively, with calls to preserve its status and uphold Jordanian oversight.
6. **Support for Lebanon and Syria:** The summit backed Lebanon's sovereignty, condemning Israeli attacks, and called for Israel's withdrawal from the Golan Heights.
7. **Regional Peace Efforts:** Leaders advocated for a UN-backed peace plan with timelines and endorsed the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative as a foundation for lasting peace.
8. **Formation of a Joint Committee:** A ministerial committee was assigned to coordinate anti-Israel advocacy and engage the Global South for support on Palestinian rights.
9. **Accountability for Settlements and Racist Policies:** The summit condemned Israeli settlement expansion and racist policies, recommending a boycott of settlement goods and suggesting classifying violent settler groups as terrorists.
10. **Humanitarian Support for Lebanon and Gaza:** Leaders called for immediate relief to Gaza and displaced Lebanese citizens, urging sustained reconstruction efforts.
11. **Sanctions on Settler Violence:** The summit advocated for international accountability of Israeli settlers and supported the classification of violent settler groups as terrorist entities.
12. **Global Cooperation:** The summit welcomed alliances, particularly with the African Union, to promote the two-state solution and uphold Palestinian rights.

ANALYSIS

The communique from the recent Arab-Islamic Summit has proven disappointing on several fronts. Despite high-profile attendance and vocal support for Palestine and Lebanon, the summit's inability to translate rhetoric into tangible action has renewed skepticism about the effectiveness of the Muslim bloc.

Lack of Action and Concrete Measures

One of the primary concerns with the summit was the absence of concrete measures. The central message of supporting Palestinian sovereignty and condemning Israeli actions was not backed by any meaningful steps to alter the situation on the ground. Instead, the summit looked once again to international organizations, particularly the United Nations, to enforce change—despite their long history of ineffectiveness. This approach overlooks the fact that Israel's policies have continued unchecked in the face of UN resolutions and global condemnation. By relying on these organizations, the summit missed an opportunity to take independent, practical steps that could have been implemented directly by the Muslim countries themselves.

Missed Opportunity for a United Response

Another critical failure of the summit was its inability to mobilize a unified, coordinated response. The collective political and economic influence of Arab and Islamic nations was not fully utilized. With the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and Lebanon demanding immediate intervention, the summit's outcomes remained largely aspirational, offering no robust or strategic action to address the crisis. Historically, OIC summits have been criticized for their lack of tangible results, and this latest summit did little to change that pattern. The absence of self-directed measures—such as economic sanctions, a unified boycott of Israel, or direct support for Palestinian resistance—raises the question of whether these pledges will lead to any real change. The people of Gaza, facing bombardment and famine, needed more than symbolic gestures; they needed concrete actions to alleviate their suffering and counter Israeli aggression.

Humanitarian Crisis Unaddressed

The failure to open the Rafah crossing and provide effective relief to the people of Gaza highlights a stark disconnect between the summit's rhetoric and the reality on the ground. The people of Gaza had hoped for the opening of vital aid channels, the evacuation of the sick and injured, and a clear plan to address the ongoing famine. Unfortunately, none of these expectations were met, deepening the sense of disillusionment among those who were hoping for immediate relief from their suffering.

The Futility of a Two-State Solution

The rhetoric surrounding a two-state solution, while frequently reiterated, is increasingly irrelevant in light of current Israeli policies. Leaders like Bezalel Smotrich, a prominent Zionist figure, have openly declared their intent to annex the West Bank, effectively dismantling any hope for a viable Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Given this reality, the focus should shift away from outdated diplomatic frameworks and instead prioritize practical measures that support Palestinian sovereignty. These measures include imposing an arms embargo on Israel, halting trade with the country, and diplomatically isolating it until it ceases its aggressive actions.

Conclusion: Symbolism Over Substance

The Arab-Islamic Summit was largely a symbolic display rather than a transformative intervention. To bring about meaningful change, Muslim countries must move beyond empty rhetoric and adopt decisive, self-directed actions that can alter the balance of power in the region and provide tangible relief to the people suffering in Palestine and Lebanon. Only through united, practical measures can the Arab and Islamic world hope to challenge Israel's policies and secure a future for Palestinians from occupation and oppression, besides saving Lebanon from aggression.