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## The Arab Summit failed to disprove those who challenge its relevance

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Arab summits are an annual reminder of the divisions between and within Arab states that only seem to deepen and multiply. This year's summit held by the Dead Sea in Jordan was determined to present a united front. What better way to do that than the Palestinian cause, which is just about the only lightning rod for pan-Arab sympathy and solidarity?

However, this unconvincing diversionary tactic only served to shine a spotlight on Arab disunity and impotence in the face of multiple internal and external challenges, crises and open conflicts. It was not hard to see this for what it was: an easy way out of very publicly revealing Arab paralysis regarding divisive topics. As such, Palestine this year served a similar purpose to the focus of last year's summit: the "war on terror".

Both issues seem straightforward on the surface – after all, the vast majority of Arabs support the Palestinian cause and oppose the likes of ISIL and Al Qaeda. However, the veneer of consensus quickly falls apart in the face of questionable sincerities, short-sighted strategies, competing agendas and ulterior motives.

One could argue against such cynicism if the summit offered anything new or substantive with regard to Palestine. Amid media reports citing analysts' expectations that Arab states would endorse a new strategy, hopes were further raised when Arab League secretary-general Ahmed Aboul Gheit said the Palestinians were expected to introduce a new diplomatic proposal. But this

was to hope against hope.

As we have come to expect, the Arab League did not disappoint in disappointing. Arab leaders lined up to condemn Israel's injustices and abuses of the Palestinians, including its occupation, its settlement enterprise and its siege of Gaza. They called for a Palestinian state along the pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

The only way this would not have sounded like a broken record was if you had been stranded on the Moon for the last quarter of a century. Despite a feeling that it was necessary to deal firmly with Israel, a verbal scolding was as good a stick as the Arab world could muster.

The carrot was to resurrect – for a third time – the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which called for normalisation of ties with all 22 Arab League member states in return for Israel's full withdrawal from the occupied territories (basically, adhering to international law and United Nations resolutions).

This represents amnesia on the part of those Arab leaders who had warned Israel over the years that the offer would not be on the table forever. It seems they need reminding of Israel's reaction to the proposal.

When it was first announced in 2002, then-prime minister Ariel Sharon called it a "non-starter". When the Arab world re-endorsed it in 2007, Israel's current prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected it, and its foreign ministry described it as "a recipe for stagnation ... Israel has no interest in stagnation. In 2009, then-foreign minister and deputy prime minister Avigdor Lieberman described it as "a dangerous proposal, a recipe for the destruction of Israel".

Israel has been rejecting the proposal for the past 15 years. It currently has the most extremist government in its history – and that is saying something – replete with members who reject a Palestinian state outright. Its most important ally, the United States, is governed by someone who has proudly proclaimed "there's nobody more pro-Israeli than I am", who has questioned the two-state solution, who wants to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and whose administration says it does not consider settlements as an obstacle to peace.

Despite all this, Arab leaders simply re-offered what Israel has consistently scoffed at, as if by some miracle its reaction would be any different this time. It is an embarrassing state of affairs. Israel learnt long ago that it need not pay any heed to its jilted Arab neighbours, because they will keep knocking on its door no matter what it does.

Israel's answer to this renewed olive branch came in the form of approving a new settlement in the West Bank – the first in 20 years – and new guidelines on settlement construction that, according to The Guardian, "indicated it will pursue a unilateral policy of largely unconstrained settlement expansion".

The summit did not produce any proposals to help occupied and besieged Palestinians in their struggle for freedom, dignity and fundamental human rights. It did not suggest anything to galvanise solidarity movements worldwide, or to promote the Palestinian narrative in the West.

It did not even mention, let alone offer to support, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. This despite BDS making great strides since its establishment 12 years ago, being recognised by Israel and its allies as a "strategic threat" (more so than the old boycott attempted by the Arab League), and being the target of a concerted campaign by pro-Israel lobbies. But what can one expect when, shamefully, even the Palestinian Authority (PA) will not endorse BDS?

For years there has been grassroots progress worldwide, resulting in important shifts in public opinion in the West, including countries whose governments are traditional allies of Israel. These grass-roots efforts include an increasingly vocal and active Jewish movement in the US, which led protests at last week's annual conference of the America Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac), the most powerful pro-Israel lobby in the US.

All this has occurred despite the Arab League, not because of it. Its latest summit, while focusing on Palestine, has only served to cement the organisation's irrelevance to the cause; no wonder some leaders, including Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas himself, were caught snoozing. To add insult to injury, this was done within eyesight of Palestine.

One can argue that even with the best of intentions, the Arab world is politically, economically and militarily powerless to help the Palestinians, and that it is hampered by the woeful dysfunction of the Palestinians' own leadership. But that unduly minimises Arab governments' contributions to the region's abysmal state of affairs.

It also raises the question: why bother making Palestine the focus of a summit that does not plan to produce any tangible support?

Because that was not the point – it was a public-relations stunt to give the Arab League a facade of relevance, not just with regard to Palestine but to the region in general. After all, if it was to only highlight issues over which it has influence, it would lose its pretence of purpose altogether.