

The Difficult Tasks for the Arab League

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The League of Arab States will hold its 28th Summit meeting on March 29, 2017 in Amman, Jordan. This is in the wake of its Nouakchott, Mauritania conference last year, which fizzled because of low-level attendance and several disagreements that reflected the divisions and discord in the Arab political order. Indeed, as an organization as old as the United Nations—it was established in March 1945—the Arab League has seen more than its share of disunity regarding such cardinal Arab issues as an Arab union, the question of Palestine and peace with Israel, and relations with the non-Arab world at large. Myriad other contentious issues remain today such as the Syrian civil war, Libyan instability, the ongoing division over the Western Sahara, and Iran's inroads into some Arab capitals.

Preparing for the upcoming summit, Secretary General of the Arab League Ahmad Abu al-Gheit declared that the conference would make some important decisions, without specifying what they might be. But judging from previous meetings and pronouncements, the decisions Arab leaders will make are unlikely to lift the organization from its nadir or chart a more positive or pivotal role for the 22-member organization. To be sure, as the league limps through its eighth decade, its problems increase in number and intensity while the Arab state system continues to be burdened with political, economic, social, and developmental challenges.

Troubles Up and Down the Arab Order

This year, the summit meeting is held in Jordan, the host country, while the Arab Levant and the Arabian Peninsula suffer chaos and bloodshed that so far have not met with any decisive league action. In Syria, a civil war grinds on into a seventh year with millions of dead, injured, and internally and externally displaced persons and a devastated physical environment. An associated battle is also being waged against a millennial organization, the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL), which controls large swathes of Syria's north. In Iraq, a battle to end ISIL's control over some of its northern territories, a discordant political atmosphere in Baghdad, and a serious dispute between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, among other problems, threaten to undo the Iraqi state itself. In Yemen, a coup by an alliance between a former president and an illegal militia and a costly and dangerous Saudi-led intervention have made peace a distant prospect.

Since 1948, the Arab League has failed to properly address the loss of Palestine and redress the injustice inflicted on the Arab Palestinians, in the process allowing Israel to occupy and nearly annex all the land on which an independent Palestinian state could be erected. Here and there, Iran lurks as an outside challenge with its support for Arab sectarian militias and its interference in Arab affairs in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It has occupied Emirati territory since 1971—the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser

Tombs, has rejected UAE calls for mediation and arbitration, and has in fact made their status nonnegotiable. Each meeting, the Arab League decries the continued occupation but refrains from going any further.

Neither is much of the North African sector of the Arab world a model of stability and political vibrancy. Bad politics and neglect of basic civil rights robbed Sudan of its south in 2011, when the southern Sudanese voted to secede and establish their own state, now mired in its own chaos. Egypt has reverted to authoritarian politics while Libya has metastasized into at least three authorities that threaten its territorial integrity. Tunisia struggles to safeguard democratic gains it made after its foray into the “Arab Spring” but remains vulnerable to salafist centrifugal forces. Algeria today does not benefit from purposeful and unified Arab action as its political system slowly atrophies with an ailing president at the helm.

Morocco appears detached from core Arab issues and in fact refused to host last year’s summit; according to a statement from its foreign ministry, the event would have been merely an opportunity for “ordinary resolutions” and “speeches that give a false impression of unity.” Algeria and Morocco are at odds over the Western Sahara—which Morocco annexed in 1975 but whose government in exile in Algiers is supported by the Algerian government.

The Upcoming Round of the Summit

As the previous rundown makes clear, the social and political troubles in the Arab world will likely obviate the possibility of an Arab League with an EU-like integrationist structure, one that could help it halt the downward spiral that has characterized its run since 1945. Whatever the diagnosis of the underlying problem in the league—weak organizational structure, lack of independence from individual Arab governments, institutional lethargy, or a malaise of noncooperation—the inescapable and likely outcome of the upcoming summit meeting will likely be failure. It is doubtful that the league will be able to devise a surefire plan to address the status of a Palestinian state, lift the Syrian nightmare, defeat ISIL, or ameliorate the festering disputes in Yemen and Libya.

The Arab League’s main failure since its establishment has been to find the right formula and strategy to address the Palestinian question, which at present is quickly moving toward an Israeli-imposed solution at the expense of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian plank is a recurrent theme in league proclamations, the latest of which contained a mere restatement of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative that rests on the idea of a Palestinian state in the occupied West Bank and Gaza with East Jerusalem as its capital. Such a position is now under tremendous pressure with the latest Israeli plans for increased settlement activity in the West Bank and Jerusalem and the Trump Administration’s abdication of the American commitment to the two-state solution.

Perhaps the Arab League should also be ready to deal with the news that the administration is prepared to ask Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, when he visits Washington in April by invitation of President Donald Trump, to revive negotiations with Israel without preconditions, temporarily accept Israeli settlements, and agree to a Palestinian state on 60 percent of the West Bank.

With collective action at its lowest point, it is hard to see how the Arab League can organize disparate interests in the Arab world and sometimes divergent policies regarding the Palestine issue. Thus far, the Arab political order is steadfast in insisting on Palestinians' national rights to independence and a state, but has not employed collective and unified action to exercise meaningful pressure on Israel or the United States. Indeed, the Arab world is subjected to pressure to accept a vision that relies on the concept of an "outside-in approach" that the Trump Administration sees as a way to arrive at an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal in which the Palestinians may have no say. And as long as the disregard for independent Palestinian action obtains and Israel exploits Arab weaknesses, hope for a Palestinian state remains remote and Israel's annexation of the West Bank draws near.

The Arab League's failure has also been made abundantly clear by its inability to find a strategy to lift the punishing nightmare of the Syrian civil war, which has just begun its seventh year. The upcoming meeting in Amman will confront the same conditions faced

by other meetings since 2011, with the added complications of a Russian hegemony over Syria, a revitalized Syrian regime, and an entrenched Iranian role in Damascus and surrounding lands. Moscow has even tried, unsuccessfully, to convince the Jordanian conveners of the 28th summit to invite Syria (suspended from the league since 2011) to participate in the conference, as if six years of bloodshed have not been enough to expose the true nature of the Syrian regime. The league should be glad that the attempt did not succeed because it would have illustrated what can easily be understood as support for the perpetrator of the Syrian carnage and would point to the failure of the league to independently push for a just Arab political order that respects human rights and democratic aspirations.

The league's inability to be a leader in organizing Arab efforts to fight ISIL is testament to the impotence of its common defense provisions. Local efforts in Syria and Iraq, regional commitments from the Saudi-led coalition, and the American-led international coalition are not accompanied by an Arab League-wide effort. If there is any common threat—other than that represented by Israel—that is worth collective Arab action and response, it is the one posed by ISIL, which seeks to destroy the Arab order and any semblance of a pan-Arab, nationalist sentiment that could challenge its ideology of violent jihadism. Moreover, the absence of the league from the anti-ISIL fight has indeed allowed local forces, especially the Kurds, to rise as

independent ethnic groups that threaten the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq, as well as international parties to impose their writ on Arab lands.

Finally, the league has failed to be a decisive actor in Yemen and post-transition Libya. As an organization that includes Yemen, a longstanding member, the Arab League did not exert the necessary efforts to try to roll back the coup by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthi-led Zaidi rebellion against the legitimate authority of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. It is arguably true that had Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar not mobilized to assist Hadi's government in early 2015, Yemen would have likely become another country where Iran has major influence. Hardly anything has transpired from the Arab military force₂ agreed on at a conference in Egypt's Sharm al-Sheikh, which was to help with the fight against ISIL and in Yemen. Still, the continuing war and challenges to legitimate authority represent a great threat to this league member's unity and to its people's well-being, and it is also a dangerous challenge to the stability of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

In Libya, it is hard to find where the league has succeeded in arresting the country's slide toward chaos and disunity since the collapse of Muammar al-Qadhafi's regime. While the Gulf countries were instrumental in guiding the league's approval of the United Nations' passage of Security Council Resolution 1973₂, allowing the use of force to defend Libyans

from Qadhafi's tanks, collective Arab action has failed to help postwar Libya. Libya today is ruled by at least three different authorities that are supported by disparate Arab countries, and they shield disorganized and illegitimate militias interested in defending turf and fiefdoms. In the end, and because of Arab disunity, Libya may arguably revert to another version of authoritarianism that again subverts civil rights and democratic aspirations in the name of reasserting order and stability.

These conditions and inter-Arab disagreements make the upcoming meeting an opportunity for either serious discussions between Arab leaders intent on reforming the status quo or, more likely given the record, another end-of-meeting declaration that affirms old platitudes and worn out clichés. Indeed, the summit will be expected to address a multitude of questions. Will there be a resolution of the ongoing serious break between Saudi Arabia and Iraq? Will Egypt and the Palestinian Authority resolve their dispute over changes to the Arab Peace Initiative? Is Iran going to be challenged with more than boiler-plate denunciations for occupying Emirati land? Will the Arab League collectively get more involved in the international effort against ISIL?

Can the Future Be Different?

The Arab League's old and unsuccessful track record and the current challenges facing the upcoming summit in Amman do not necessarily translate into a completely irredeemable organization. But changing what has become an increasingly unacceptable status

quo will require addressing four important considerations.

First, the Arab League would do well to acknowledge and act on the calls from the Arab street for more political openness in the Arab political order, more respect for civil and human rights in Arab society, and more acceptance of democratic development. Only then will the league become an organization capable of playing a role in the future Arab world that will depend on youth for its development and progress.

Second, the organizational ethos of the Arab League resembles those prevalent in individual Arab state institutions, which are generally reactive and driven by events instead of following a strategic design that anticipates and addresses challenges and threats. There also needs to be renewed emphasis on making the league organizationally independent from the Arab states and politically agile to be able to resolve intra-Arab disputes.

Third, and concomitantly, it behooves the Arab states to allow some transparency in their decision-making on matters that affect collective Arab action and inter-Arab relations. It also is advisable to permit the Arab League, once it develops its secretariat's abilities, to examine whether certain states' actions are detrimental to other states.

Fourth, it may be time for the Arab world to finally establish its permanent military force to defend the territorial integrity of vulnerable states, participate in peace and stability operations where needed (such as in Syria, Libya, and Yemen), and provide troops and material to fight terrorist organizations.

The charter of the Arab League already provides for a Joint Defense Council, and it may be high time that a collective Arab force becomes a reality instead of remaining possible only in principle.

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