

The Arab League has No Bark and No Bite

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Author Note I am grateful to my mother, who has provided unending guidance and support throughout my time at McGill. Thank you for challenging me to think critically, showing me the world and bestowing within me a desire to learn, question and understand.

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Abstract Along with a moment of peace in the middle of the 20th century came large changes in the world order; namely the rise of newly independent nations and the formation of supranational organisations. The Middle East was the first region to establish an intergovernmental security network after 1945 when the Arab League was created. While the institution has had several opportunities to prove itself capable of uniting and pacifying a region often described to be “without regionalism,” it has rather served as a tool in the toolbox of Arab nationalist leaders like Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser to solidify their political legitimacy and maintain a strict policy of non-interference. The League’s failure to provide a place for mediation and resolution of regional conflicts further undermines its effectiveness. The Arab Spring that swept across the region beginning in 2009 brought optimistic projections for the League’s capacity to deal with the conflict, particularly following the League’s suspension of Syria following brutal repression of demonstrations in 2010. Is the failure of the League a product poor design at its offset or could it provide a hopeful forecast for increased regional cooperation and peacebuilding in the Middle East? Without bark and without bite, the latter will be difficult to achieve.

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Introduction

The end of the Second World War ushered in a new world order based on international cooperation and collective security, demonstrated by the dozens of international organizations founded in the years shortly following. Another result of the war's end was a dramatic shift in the Middle Eastern political landscape, as several nations gained independence and raced to assert themselves regionally and internationally. The Middle East is often described as a "region without regionalism" (Aarts 1999, 915) despite the Arab League's standing as the first regional organization established after 1945 (Barnett and Solingen 2007, 181). This can be difficult to understand considering the ethnolinguistic and cultural resemblances that might lead one to believe Middle Eastern nations could coexist with relative ease. In the Middle East, state formation occurred in parallel with the development of regional institutions (Pinfari 2016, 3). After centuries of European and Ottoman rule, emerging political elites were unable to mobilize strong national identities when asserting their independence, forcing them to rely on a common Arab identity instead. Rather than serving its purpose as a supranational body, the Arab League was institutionally designed to serve the domestic motivations of Middle Eastern leaders and has thus failed to foster regional cooperation.

This paper will begin with a brief account of the Arab League's formation and then explore how the complicated history of regionalism in the Middle East shaped the League's institutional structure. Next, it will demonstrate how the League was designed to fail as an effective supranational institution, serving instead as a platform for Arab leaders like Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser to draw legitimacy and ensure individual sovereignty. Then, a quantitative analysis of the League's success in mediating regional conflicts will be considered to better understand when and where the League has chosen to intervene. Finally, the League's performance in the outset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 will be evaluated to determine whether its actions represented more of the same, or if there exists a real potential for institutional reform. This analysis will focus on the League's effectiveness as a facilitator of conflict resolution and regional security. However, it is important to acknowledge that the League has played a significant role in the region as a cultural mechanism through its influence over language, education and the preservation of heritage sites.

The Arab League: Institutionalizing Weak Middle Eastern Regionalism

By the 1930s, a region of independent Arab nations began to form. For Egypt, seeking to fully free itself from Britain's grasp, becoming more involved in Arab affairs was an opportunity to establish itself as a regional leader. Informal discussions between Egypt and Iraq began in the late 1930s and focused chiefly on the prospect of forming a regional body tasked with promoting and working towards common Arab values and objectives (Barnett and Solingen 2007, 186-8). From the offset, Egypt's motivation was clear: Arab leaders viewed each other as potential threats to their sovereignty and survival, and Egypt would rather control the Arab agenda than be controlled by it (Lerman 1995, 291). In October 1944, the Alexandria Protocol was signed by Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Transjordan, and Lebanon, committing them to the formation of the joint Arab organization Egypt had envisioned years earlier (Hourani 1947, 129-32). On March 22, 1945, North Yemen and Saudi Arabia joined the original five nations in Cairo to sign the Charter of the League of Arab States, officially founding the Arab League. The Charter advocated cooperation in social, economic and cultural matters between members and laid out a threefold purpose: to strengthen relations between member states, coordinate policies to further cooperation and maintain independence and sovereignty, and promote the general welfare and interests of the Arab states (134). Ostensibly, the Charter institutionalized cooperation and Arab unity; however, its formal institutional structure and rules made it a safeguard for political leaders, guaranteeing sovereignty and strict respect of their territorial states.

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Politics of Arab nationalism and shared identity encouraged the founding members of the League to embrace the rhetoric of Arab unity to legitimize their regimes, despite fears that Arab unity, in practice, would greatly threaten their autonomy. Within the forty-eight articles of the Charter, the concern for state sovereignty is explicitly repeated twenty-two times (Korany 2017, 94). Thus, from the beginning, the League was designed to fail as a binding regional institution promoting political and economic cooperation. Instead, it was utilized as an instrument by Arab politicians hoping to bolster their status by positioning themselves as champions of Arab nationalism both domestically and regionally (Barnett and Solingen 2007, 192). Resolutions could only be passed unanimously and were only binding for members who participated in the voting, thus tying the Arab Council's hands on all issues involving a member state and providing a defection route for all members (Kechichian 1994, 7). Soon after its founding, scholars began questioning whether the League was meeting its objective as a body intended to "support and stabilize" rather than "strengthen and consolidate" ties within the existing network of sovereign states (Little 1956, 140).

The League's failure to promote effective regional cooperation can be understood through the lens of the weakness of Middle Eastern regionalism. The relationship between regional integration and state-building has been historically complex, as political elites consistently experienced tension between advancing *wataniya*, state interests, and *qawmiya*, pan-Arab ideals resonating among different Arab populations (Pinfari 2009, 7). Because the process of decolonization underscored the establishment of the League, it had to address the legacies of European colonialism. Due to arbitrarily drawn colonial borders, regional capital, and energy surpluses were separate from areas of high demographic, military, and administrative capacity, which prevented the development of large, internal markets (Lustick 1997, 654). Due to low complementarity between regional economies, there has been a persistent absence of substantial economic incentives for regional economic integration. Integration is known to have the spillover effects of facilitating political integration and multilateral security initiatives (Pinfari 2016, 2).

The role played by Western imperial powers in actively tampering with Middle Eastern power structures and suppressing policy coordination further elucidates the weakness of the Arab League and the absence of a regional hegemon that could have provided the direction and resources necessary to better establish a strongly binding regional institution (Lustick 1997, 665). At the time of its conception, Egypt might have been viewed as a potential nation to fill the position of regional hegemon. The Arab League chose Cairo as the location for its headquarters, reflecting Egypt's relative socio-political weight in the region (Korany 2007, 94). However, Egypt's failure to reconcile the tension between *wataniya* and *qawmiya* prevented it from becoming what the region perhaps needed to end the Arab League's cooperation stalemate by orienting regional attitudes towards multilateralism and common security.

Arab Unity as an Instrument in Nasser's Pan-Arab Toolbox

Following his involvement in the 1952 overthrow of King Farouk's monarchy, Gamal Abdel Nasser was elected President of Egypt in 1956 (Lustick 1997, 666). His proud and successful defiance of a joint Israeli, French, and British invasion in November 1956, following his nationalization of the Suez Canal, made him a champion of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism (667). By placing himself at the center of the Arab League before assuming the presidency, Nasser signalled his power and Egypt's increasing role in regional and world politics. Additionally, by the 1940s, Nasser was growing reluctant to rely on Britain for defence given the mounting Israeli threat (Pinfari 2016, 6). Thus, Egypt proposed a collective security pact to the League in the late 1940s. League members signed the Treaty of Joint Defence and Economic Cooperation Among States of the Arab League in April 1950, pledging to settle conflicts through non-violent means,

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engage in collective defence, and integrate their military and foreign policies. In the context of the 1940s, the passing of this pact blocked the potential for an Iraqi-Syrian unification that had been in talks for several years, thereby preserving the balance of power in the region and rejecting an essential part of Arab unity (Barnett and Solingen 2007, 212).

Despite advocating increased policy coordination and cooperation, the 1950 pact did little to change the nature of the protectionist, inward-looking, militarily active regimes characteristic of the Cold War Middle East, whereby the maneuverings of political leaders power politics were defined by the prioritization of relative gains over absolute gains (Beck 2014, 9). The pursuit of relative gains limits cooperation as states base their decisions on the maximization of domestic power and reduction of power of other states. An incredibly competitive dynamic amongst regional political leaders meant doing whatever possible to limit the political power of neighbouring regimes, as demonstrated by Egypt's blocking of an Iraqi-Syrian unification. Ironically, Egypt sought to secure its sovereignty and restrain the power of one of its largest competitors by establishing a political union with Syria in 1958. Nasser's ability to outsource Egyptian nationalism was thwarted by intense Syrian anti-union opposition, leading Syria to withdraw from the United Arab Republic in 1961 (Beck 2015, 198). Nations also expressed relative power concerns by refusing to open their markets to regional trade. In 1965, the Arab League established an Arab Common Market with the intention of providing a platform for regional trade between Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. This is just one example of countless League initiatives and programs that existed largely on paper and minimally in practice. Since the 1950s, inter-Arab trade has only constituted between 7% and 10% of the region's total trade flows (Barnett and Solingen 2007, 197). The fear of strengthening a regional counterpart through mutually beneficial political collaboration or economic liberalization guided the domestic policy of many states. This political outlook reflects how the conditions of Middle Eastern state formation served to solidify the power of authoritarian regimes in the region. When state consolidation occurs prior to the establishment of multilateral organizations, domestic actors can secure their power domestically and realize the benefits of regional coordination. However, in the Middle East, legacies of colonialism and decolonization meant that domestic consolidation and the formation of the League occurred simultaneously. Leaders were reluctant to strengthen their neighbours through cooperation, fearing this would undermine their domestic power and stability. Thus, with the support of Western governments, authoritarian leaders were propelled into power during the process of state formation, preventing regional cooperation. Unfortunately, the prioritization of relative gains by authoritarian regimes undermined meaningful economic development and regional security.

Nasser's death in 1970 symbolized the death of Arab nationalism and thus represented a decline in the League's perceived usefulness to political leaders as an index of Arab unity (Harb 2017). During the 1970s, the Middle East underwent a shift in the balance of power toward oil-rich Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, the rise of Islamist politics, and increased involvement of the United States in the region's affairs (Pinfari 2009, 5). In the 1980s, the absence of regional stability and cooperation was a key barrier facing Middle Eastern states welcoming foreign investment, financial assistance and Western technology. The Arab League's failure to act swiftly or effectively during the bloody Lebanese Civil War further demonstrated its incapacity to secure the region. Between 1945 and 1980, the League had passed over four thousand resolutions, 80% of which were never implemented (Aarts 1999, 917). The League was also criticized for its refusal to condemn genocidal human rights abuses inflicted by the Iraqi regime during the Iraq-Iran War, citing its founding principles of sovereignty and non-interference as justification for its silence. For many members of the international community, it was difficult to point to any example where the

Arab League had made an impact – directly or indirectly – on advancing regional cooperation or resolving a Middle Eastern conflict or crisis.

The Arab League's Successes and Failures in Numbers

A quantitative approach analyzing the successes and failures of the Arab League illustrates not only the number of times it has successfully mediated or resolved a conflict, but also in what contexts it has chosen to get involved in the first place. According to a 2009 study of 56 regional conflicts and crises between 1945 and 2008, the League only mediated nineteen, and successfully resolved the conflict on just five occasions (Pinfari 2009, 10). Furthermore, the study identifies the Arab League itself as the primary cause of success in only one of 56 conflicts, being the Lebanese presidential crisis from 2007 to 2008. Based on this data, the League appears not only to strictly limit the number of conflicts it chooses to become involved in, but also to fail in most cases to contribute to the successful resolution of those conflicts.

When broken down further, the data reveals how the performance of the League significantly differs based on the type of conflict. Due to the pact's clearly dictated respect for the autonomy and territorial sovereignty of Arab states, it is generally hesitant to involve itself with internal strife, only intervening in five of twenty-two major civil wars since 1945 (10). When the Lebanese Civil War erupted in 1975, the extent of the League's involvement was to call upon all parties to "exercise wisdom and restraint" in the conflict (11). After over a year of silence, in June 1976, the League released another public statement expressing the same sentiment. By that time, thousands of civilians had been massacred by the Kataeb Christian militia and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Dakhlallah 2012, 406).

In line with balance of power theory, the League has demonstrated a commitment to safeguarding the independence of smaller Arab states (Waltz 1979, 11). Leading up to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, the League held two summits to resolve the dispute over oil between both countries. These failed, leading to the internationalization of Gulf security through direct foreign intervention by the United States and the United Kingdom, pointing to a third pattern in Arab League involvement (Dakhlallah 2012, 409). In conflicts and crises where a foreign power or international organization has intervened, the Arab League has traditionally taken a backseat or chosen to remove itself from the conflict resolution process completely. This is evident in the League's negligible effort in mediating the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Waltz 1979, 13-4). In recent years, the League has stopped excusing its inaction by referring to its founding principles. This could be due to the rise in the active role of non-state actors as both initiators and interveners in Middle Eastern conflict. Now, the League has more opportunity to rely on foreign powers, sectors of state populations, and insurgents to attempt to provide security for the Arab collective it was created to represent.

The Arab Spring: Why Should We Expect Reform?

Turmoil in the Middle East has not ceased to exist as the region entered the second decade of the century. An optimistic projection of League reform and increased regional cooperation developed within scholarly circles as a result of the Arab League's involvement in the early days of the Arab uprisings that spread across the Middle East in late 2010, specifically in Syria. Following the Syrian regime's violent and swift suppression of a large wave of protests calling for the removal of President Bashar al-Assad, eighteen of twenty-two Arab League states voted to suspend Syria from the League (Rami 2011). In its statement communicating the suspension, the League referred to the importance of upholding values such as the expectation a government should refrain from the use of disproportionate violence against its own people. This was the second time the League addressed human rights principles like those of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, the first instance being its condemnation of Israel's occupation policy in the

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early 2000s (Beck 2015, 197). For the first time in its history, the Arab League modified its strict principle of respecting the sovereignty of member states in the interest of protecting human rights and overall regional security. In January 2012, the League backed Morocco as it presented a draft resolution to the United Nations Security Council calling upon President Assad to step down and transfer power, which failed to be adopted following vetoes from China and Russia (Borger 2012). Economic sanctions imposed by the League on Syria in 2011 have also failed to completely strip Assad of his power or influence a change in regime behaviour. Aside from these “declaratory level” initiatives (Beck 2015, 197), the League has been unable to coordinate any meaningful joint-Arab military or economic action, demonstrated in its failure to act decisively as the Islamic State encroached on territory in Iraq and Syria (Harb 2017).

Understanding the domestic position of the two key regional security players, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, helps to determine whether or not the potential of a reformed Arab League, in which attitudes reflecting a responsibility to protect are prioritized over fear-based expressions of individual sovereignty, is realistic. At the outset of the Syrian crisis, Egypt was preoccupied with reversing its extreme economic contraction and insecurity crisis that resulted following the seizure of power by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the presidency of Mohammed Morsi (Beck 2015, 199). Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, with its system of extremely low political participation based on a conservative political interpretation of Islam, was on the defensive (Beck 2014, 16-8). When moderate manifestations of Islamism came to power in Tunisia and Egypt, Saudi Arabia faced domestic pressure to reform. However, the regime’s stable economic status as a wealthy Gulf oil state afforded it the ability to distract its population from demonstrating, as they reaped the benefits of increased rent income from very high global oil prices beginning in 2010 (16). Saudi Arabia’s recent gains in relative power vis-à-vis Egypt provided it with the platform to exert influence on a global scale, utilizing the Arab League as it took a clear lead of joint-Arab policy toward Syria.

The major incentive for Saudi Arabia to become involved with multilateralism was the presence of regional challenges ignited by the Arab uprisings that threatened its domestic stability. Although it continues to remain involved in the Syrian conflict through the large-scale provision of weaponry to various rebel groups and its engagement on other frontiers as instructed by the United States, Saudi Arabia’s role in mobilizing the Arab League toward action in Syria has diminished (Bremmer 2018). Because the League’s role in Syria during the early stages of the Spring was a direct consequence of Saudi Arabian domestic and regional security concerns, its involvement was an ad hoc vitalization rather than a meaningful departure from its long-held status as merely a “podium for grandstanding” (Dakhlallah 2012, 411). Sustainability of the League’s active involvement in regional issues would require a lengthy reform process extending to amending the League’s original pact and institutional structure. As Syria’s Civil War roars on into its eighth year, there is no indication that regionalism is on the rise or that institutional reform is occurring in the Arab League. Relative power concerns continue to trump absolute ones, as states cling onto concerns of sovereignty, which will continue to “check and balance any cooperative project” (Fawcett 2004, 444).

Conclusion

After the League’s failure to play a meaningful role in resolving the Second Gulf War, Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa was asked if the League was “dead.” He replied the League would not work as long as the Arab body remained weak and that some “Arab forces” were interested in expanding the League’s mandate slightly but never to the point where it would represent a major voice in the Arab world (Barnett and Solingen 2007, 216). The Arab League has failed to accomplish the relationship strengthening, cooperation and policy coordination initially

laid out in its pact. However, after nearly 70 conflicts and crises within the region, it has become clear the League was not intended to serve as a regional body for collective security action and conflict resolution. The League's institutional structure, namely its principle of unanimity, as well as the way Arab leaders such as Nasser have employed the League as an expression of Arab unity while simultaneously using it to institutionalize the protection of authoritarian regimes, paint a clearer picture of the shape regionalism has taken in the Middle East post-World War II. In a region where "the building blocks of order have been continuously contested," the Arab League has failed to provide temporary or lasting security for its members (Dakhlallah 2012, 399).

In a world lacking global governance, multilateral organizations are a safeguard against excesses of power politics, which promote security in the process (395). The Middle East remains unstable because state sovereignty concerns continue to drive nations of the region toward unilateral, defensive political, military and economic activities in efforts to maintain relative power superiority over one another. While the Arab League had only been involved in the successful mediation of 9% of Middle Eastern conflicts between its conception and 2008 (Pinfari 2009, 10), its legendary suspension of Syrian membership in response to Assad regime atrocities in 2011 led some to predict the League was turning a new page. Just as Egypt used the League to advance its policy agenda and secure its sovereignty in the 1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia, concerned regional instability would seep into its borders, saw leading League policy toward Syria as an opportunity to reassure itself of its territorial autonomy and domestic security. The Arab League, in its inability to develop a useful joint-Arab response to the crisis in Syria, remains incapable of resolving conflicts plaguing the region. Until nations view exerting regional influence and power based on cooperation rather than zero-sum competition (Nolte 2010, 887), it will be difficult for the Middle East to attain regional security with or without the Arab League.

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