

How important are regional and international organizations in the Middle East?

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News:

In March 2014, an Arab League summit was held without major achievements. In July 2014, activities of Arab regional organizations as well as international organizations are rather low despite roaring conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Gaza.

Keywords:

Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, OPEC, Arab Spring

Summary:

The present analysis aims at analyzing the role of international and regional organizations in the Middle East. In comparison to other world regions, regional and international relations of the Arab world are under-institutionalized. International organizations play a less important role than single external powers: the United Kingdom and France in the period of classical imperialism and from half a century ago and onwards mainly the US. Moreover, Arab actors do not play a significant role in important international organizations. Above all, the Arab actors have not developed regional organizations that would be able to leave their mark on regional affairs—a fact not only in contrast with the case of Europe but also that of other developing areas. The aims of the present analysis are, firstly, to better comprehend the finding of an under-institutionalized Middle East; secondly, there are some interesting exceptions that are to be shed light on; thirdly, there are some indicators that the “Arab Spring” vitalized regional organizations in the Middle East.

The Arab world is highly penetrated by Western actors, particularly in the issue areas of security and economics. After the Second World War, particularly the US knitted a dense net of *bilateral* relations, through which the Administration attempted (and still attempts) to pursue its interests in the Middle East that are defined as strategic. Mainly in security matters, international organizations do not play a major role. The Gulf War in 1991 was approved by the Security Council of the United Nations. Yet, the US proved in 2003 that it is willing and capable of waging war in the Middle East with a number of handpicked alliance partners. Much more than as an instrument to legitimize its own policy towards the Middle East, the US has been using the Security Council to prevent international pressure on its major ally in the Middle East—Israel—by using its veto power to safeguard Israel. NATO holds a Mediterranean Dialogue with some selected Arab states plus Israel; however, policies with a high impact factor such as the campaign in Libya in 2011 are the exception rather than the rule.

In the economic realm, international organizations—particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF)—play a more significant role. After the end of the oil boom in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly the Arab states with few resources blundered into budget crises. With the exception of the Gulf States, most Arab countries sooner or later had to resort to the IMF, thereby being exposed to a neo-liberal agenda. Although most structural adjustment programs that the IMF imposed on the Arab states were diluted and only half-heartedly implemented, the IMF still contributed to the fact that the reform agenda, which originally contained strong political aspects, gradually mutated into an economic program of liberalization. This also had a significant impact on the Arab Spring: The negative repercussions of a (distorted) neo-liberal policy—privatization policies served as gateways for corruption and nepotism mainly of higher strata of the society—contributed in several Arab countries to the termination of the social contracts that implied waiving political participation rights in exchange for a minimum of state welfare. However, there are no strong indicators that the West had the intention to weaken the authoritarian Arab regimes; rather, economic liberalization and structural adjustment were meant to stabilize the existing political structures.

Nominally, there is no shortage of regional institutions in the Middle East. However, most of them are more reminiscent of paper tigers than of powerful organizations. Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council were not always ineffective in dealing with minor, sub-regional issues; yet, core issues and central conflicts were mainly influenced by single external actors, particularly the US. For instance, the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council were not influential in the Gulf crises of 1990/91 and 2003 or the issue of Iran's nuclear program although Arab interests were highly affected in all cases.

In the course of the Arab Spring, however, some regional organizations became vitalized. It began with the Arab League's policy towards Libya in 2011. The League explicitly supported a no-fly zone which was established within the frame of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973. Yet, the policy of the Arab League was still secondary to Western initiatives and could not exert influence on the massive NATO bombardment of Libya in 2011. Towards Syria, however, the Arab League pursued a rather independent policy. Although all attempts to terminate or at least fence the civil war in Syria failed, two innovations of the Arab League's policy are remarkable. Firstly, the organization broke with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states—a principle that had been observed meticulously by the Arab League for decades. Thus, the membership of Bashar al-Assad's regime was suspended in November 2011. Moreover, in March 2013 the Syrian seat was transferred to the Syrian opposition as organized in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. Due to basic dissent and conflicts in the Syrian National Coalition, the Syrian seat was declared vacant in March 2014. However, the major decision to exclude the regime of Assad was not tackled by the latter move. Furthermore, the decision to suspend Assad's regime was taken and implemented although (apart from Syria) two member states voted nay: Lebanon and Yemen. According to the charter of the AL, decisions on suspending a member must be taken unanimously (except the targeted country). The Arab League simply defied this principle—thereby strengthening the AL as an institution.

Also the Gulf Cooperation Council launched initiatives in the Arab Spring that clearly exceeded the limits of previous policies. Thus, the deployment of—mainly Saudi—troops to oppress the Bahrain uprising was legitimized by the Council. In the case of Bahrain, the organization went beyond the competences of a classic military alliance (like NATO) by coming to the aid of a regime that was not threatened by an external power but by internal forces of the civil society. Moreover, the Gulf Cooperation Council launched an initiative aimed at embracing Jordan and Morocco as (full) members of the organization. Both countries are net oil importers; besides, Morocco's location is geographically distant. Yet, Jordan and Morocco are the only Arab states beyond the Gulf that share the attribute of monarchism. This implies that the organization toys with the idea of transforming itself from a sub-regional to a genuine regional organization of a "kings' club."

Nota bene that conservative Saudi Arabia is the main actor behind the policies that have to be considered innovative from an institutionalist point of view. Assessed on the basis of its domestic policies, Saudi Arabia plays a reactionary role in the Arab Spring. At the beginning of the Arab Spring, the monarchies appeared to be on the defensive since they shared many of the features that caused uprisings in the Arab republics. Yet,

rather than being re-active (as was the case in the last period of revolutionary change in the Middle East in the 1950s), the Gulf monarchies tried from the very beginning of the Arab Spring to play an active part in the region. Qatar that domestically was not affected by the Arab Spring attempted to play a major role, thereby creating a competitive relationship to Saudi Arabia, which in turn was an incentive for Riyadh to break new ground in Arab organizations, particularly the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Mainly as a result of economically and politically negative developments in Egypt, whose political leaderships failed to develop its potentials as a regional power, Saudi Arabia—after a short crisis period at the beginning of the Arab Spring—found itself in the position of the strongest regional actor in the Arab Middle East. Possibly, Saudi Arabia—despite its extremely conservative agenda—is on the path to become a regional power that is willing and capable of acting in non-traditional ways, for instance by using modern regional institutions for its power projection.

In international organizations, particularly the United Nations, Arab actors traditionally play a rather defensive role. The only major exception is the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Arab states supporting the PLO in its struggle for national independence against Israel. Particularly in terms of new, “progressive” topics such as gender equality and protection of the environment, Arab states mostly act as delayers rather than promoters. There is, however, one organization of high relevance in the North-South Conflict in which Arab states play a significant role: the Organization of Oil Exporting Countries (OPEC). According to general wisdom, OPEC played an important role in world history mainly in the 1970s, when the international energy system was revolutionized, whereas market forces are believed to have been dominant since the 1980s. However, if one has a look at the ratio of proved reserves to production, the relevance of OPEC appears to be significantly higher today. According to British Petroleum, in 2012 OPEC controlled 73% of the global oil resources, whereas its share of the global production was only 43%. Since production costs particularly in the Gulf are comparatively low, the high ratio proved reserves to production of OPEC is a strong indicator that the organization effectively works in a cartel-like manner. Despite all conflicts and cheating on the quota that were introduced as a major pillar of OPEC policies in 1982, the organization has been contributing to the fact that global oil prices are far beyond the level of market prices. In the Arab Spring, OPEC played an indirect but important role: With the exception of Libya (whose authoritarian leader Muammar al-Gaddafi was toppled as a result of the 2011 NATO intervention), the control of petro-dollars enabled the authoritarian regimes of the Arab oil states to survive the Arab Spring unchallenged or at least its first major storms.

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