

The Arab League: A New Policy Approach in the Making?

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On March 24, 2013, the Arab League announced the transfer of Syria's representation in the regional organization from the official Syrian government headed by Bashar al-Asad, whose membership had been suspended in November 2011, to the representative of the oppositional Syrian National Coalition.¹ This move, which in terms of political symbolism is quite spectacular, is the latest initiative in a chain of activities launched by the Arab League after the historic events of the Arab Spring. The League's first and widely covered major policy attempt in the frame of the Arab Spring was its decision to back a no fly zone in Libya made in March 2011. Since the fall of 2011, the Arab League has focused on Syria by launching several initiatives such as suspending Syria's membership in the League, imposing economic sanctions, setting up a peace plan and launching a peacekeeping mission.² The present short article aims at assessing the activities of the Arab League since the Arab Spring by presenting and discussing five theses.

¹ BBC News Middle East: Opposition takes Syria Seat at Arab League Summit, March 29, 2013, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21936731>.

² For an overview see Müjge Küçükkeleş 2012: Arab League's Syrian Policy (SETA Policy Brief No. 56), available at: http://setadc.org/pdfs/SETA_Policy_Brief_No_56_Arab_Leagues_Syrian_Policy.pdf.

1. **In the Middle Eastern context, the recent Arab League's attempt to shape regional politics is innovative.** The fact that a regional organization attempts to shape regional affairs does not appear very exciting at first glance: With the end of the Cold War, regionalization of politics became more prominent on a global scale. Not only in advanced Western areas such as Europe but also in developing areas such as East Asia, Latin America and also sub-Saharan Africa, regional powers emerged that have frequently used regional organizations to exert influence on regional affairs. However, in the first two decades after the end of the Cold War, the Middle East hardly participated in this global trend. During this period, the Middle East experienced an increase of direct interference by the US being the only remaining superpower. The Arab League remained what it had been for decades: a rather weak organization with minor impact on the Middle East. The only truly significant initiative made by the League in 2002 was the Arab Peace Initiative. The Arab Peace Initiative was innovative insofar as the Arab leaders for the first time in history explicitly and unrestrictedly offered normalization to Israel in exchange for Israel ending its occupation of Palestine. Yet, it is telling that the Arab League did not launch any significant policy within the scope of member controlled areas.
2. **In its approach towards Syria, the Arab League broke with its tradition of non-interference in internal affairs of its member states.** Since the reconciliation between Arab republics and monarchies as an outcome of the Arab League summit in Khartoum in 1967, the League has served as a conservative stronghold advocating the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states: As a result of the June War in 1967, the Arab republics agreed to abandon their previous policies of exporting their national revolutions to the monarchies in exchange for the Gulf oil-exporting countries' readiness to support the budgets of the financially challenged republics. Therefore, the Arab League's decision to offer the Syrian seat to the opposition is to be considered a major break with past practices. Moreover, with the decision to suspend the membership of Asad's Syria in the Arab League, the organization defied the strict conservative regulations of its charter according to which unanimity among those that decide on the suspension of a member state is necessary since Lebanon and Yemen voted nay.
3. **The ideational background of the Arab League's policy towards Syria is based on universal values which leading Arab actors in the League ignore in their domestic politics.** The Arab League's rationale for its policy towards Syria is based on ideas of international law and universal values, particularly human rights. This is innovative since the Arab League in the past primarily emphasized values based on Arab nationalism. Previously, reference to universal rights such as human rights were mainly confined to policies targeting the Israeli occupation of Palestine whereas ar-

guments referring to human rights did not play a significant role in assessing policies of member states towards their own constituencies.

The new policy of the Arab League reveals double standards, particularly when taken into consideration that the driving actors of the Arab League's policy towards Syria are Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The governments of both states are extremely authoritarian and have a very poor human rights record. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was among those eight states that abstained in the vote of the General Assembly of the United Nations on the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

Another dimension of double standard becomes apparent when comparing the Arab League's policy towards Bahrain in the first half of 2011. In the Bahraini case, the Arab League remained inactive when the Bahraini military crushed the uprising. Contrary to the regime in Bahrain, which enjoyed strong support from the Gulf countries, the regime in Syria—as well as the one in Libya—lacked powerful Arab allies in the Arab League: Arab allies of Assad's regime (Lebanon, Yemen) and states with more or less clear concerns over a rigid sanction policy (Algeria, Iraq, and Jordan) were too weak to prevail in the Arab League.

4. **The impact of the Arab League's policy towards Syria is limited mainly as a result of Western reluctance to interfere.** Although the Arab League has launched several initiatives to end the civil war in Syria, it has not been effective: The peacekeeping mission turned out to be a failure, and the economic sanction policy adopted by the Arab League in November 2011 had a limited impact. Moreover, while the suspension of Assad's Syria from the Arab League and the offer of the Syrian seat to the opposition formalized Assad's loss of regional legitimacy (Assad enjoyed respect as Syria remained a "front state" against Israel) among the general Arab public, it was too little too late to have any significant impact.

To be fair, many sanction policies and other forms of policies directed against "rogue states" in contemporary history of international relations have proven ineffective.³ However, a comparison with the Libyan case shows that the Arab League may be successful under certain conditions. Apparently, one crucial condition is Western support. When the Emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad Ibn Khalifa al-Thani, proposed an Arab military intervention in Syria, the initiative was generally received as unrealistic both from a political/diplomatic and a military perspective.⁴

³ Martin Beck and Johannes Gerschewski 2009: On the Fringes of the International Community: The Making and Survival of "Rogue States", in: Sicherheit und Frieden/Security and Peace 27.2, 84-90.

⁴ Alahramonline September 27, 2012: Arab military Intervention in Syria Unrealistic: Analysts, available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentPrint/2/0/54028/World/0/Arab-military-intervention-in-Syria-unrealistic-An.aspx>.

5. **The active role of the Arab League is driven by authoritarian states.** It is striking that two authoritarian regimes—Saudi Arabia and Qatar—took the lead in the League’s policy towards Syria rather than the newly emerged Arab transitional regimes. In the last major era of fundamental political change in the Arab world—the era of republican revolutions and Pan-Arabism in the 1950s and early 1960s—close ties between Egypt and Syria (and later Libya) emerged. In this period, Egypt attempted to become a regional power, whereas Saudi Arabia and Qatar played a rather defensive role. However, the transitional systems produced by the Arab Spring—mainly Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya—clearly give priority to domestic rather than regional affairs. Moreover, as a long-term result of the oil revolution in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia and Qatar control comparatively high power capabilities and diplomatic skills, respectively.

Conclusion

Triggered by the Arab Spring, the Arab League has broken new ground. Particularly in terms of its policy towards Syria, the League has departed from its tradition of non-interference in domestic affairs of member states, thereby adopting global, universal values of human rights. At the same time, there are good reasons to remain skeptical concerning whether the League’s Syrian policy means a fundamental shift. Syria and also Libya were rather “easy cases” since the uprisings took place in republics that had replaced monarchies in the 1950s and 1960s. Thus, the decline of the regimes in Syria and Libya could be welcomed by both the new transitional regimes of Egypt and Tunisia and the monarchies of the Gulf. Moreover, the reference to human rights reveals double standards, particularly since Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been the driving forces behind the new policy of the Arab League. Last but not least, the policy towards Syria has been of very limited success so far. At the same time, the meaning of delegitimizing the regime in Damascus which had enjoyed respect as a “front state” against Israel should not be underestimated. After its Syrian policy it will not be that easy for the Arab League to fall back to its old approach and to ignore or even approve massive human rights violations by Arab regimes crushing oppositional movements.