

The League of Arab States and the Amman Summit: What next ?

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The French saying “plus ça change plus c’est la même chose” (the more there is a change the more it is the same) best describes the outcome of the League of Arab States Summit Meeting held at The Dead Sea in Jordan on March 29th, 2017.

There were no “surprises” in the outcome of the Summit, in terms of the adoption of any strategic decisions or of any major policy formulation, despite the fact that the Arab world is besieged by all kinds of threats and challenges.

Indeed, one can argue that the Arab Summit is increasingly becoming a yearly ceremonial rendezvous; the aim of which is to confer the highest collective pan-Arab legitimacy on policy trends and loosely defined positions on

key issues of common interest or of particular vital interest to the major leading Arab power or powers at one point in time.

The Summit adopted a 15-point Final Declaration, prepared as usual by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. The Declaration carries on one hand the messages that reflect the priorities of the key leading power or powers. On the other hand, it is drafted in a manner that allows those who might not support it, because of their policy choices on a particular issues or issues, to go along with it. We can describe this tradition of multilateral Arab forums as “passive support”, a noncommittal one at the policy level while staying in line with the major power or powers’ policy choices in order not to clash. The formula is simply not to disagree with the general governing trend because such a disagreement could have a price to pay. While the symbolic “diplomatic” support costs very little in terms of policy commitments, as a seasoned observer of the LAS described it, resolutions are not made to be necessarily implemented.

In general terms, the following observations could be made regarding the outcomes of the Jordan Summit:

-It witnessed a large attendance by Heads of State, fifteen out of twenty one attended, Syria’s participation being suspended.

This is in comparison to last year's Summit held in Mauritania. The geopolitical position of Jordan in the heart of regional politics as well as the important role it plays, particularly its much expected future role in hot issues ranging from Syria to the Palestinian issue to Iraq to combatting terrorism, were important factors in the large high level participation

-The election of Donald Trump to the White House came as a new and important game-changer. It carried great expectations, particularly for friends and allies of the United States who were frustrated by the policies or lack of policies of President Obama and hence, by the need to react. They needed to send a strong message regarding their priorities in the region and their expectations from the new administration to both friends and foes. The Summit provided a platform for this message.

-What happens usually on the margins of the Summit is more important than in the ceremonial plenary sessions of general debate and statements. For example, there was an expected meeting between Saudi Arabia and Egypt which would help turn the page on a certain coldness that characterized their relationship. This meeting allowed for a new take for a much needed working relationship and cooperation between the two key powers in the Arab regional order. These two countries weigh heavily in setting the Arab regional agenda and its priorities by acting as the locomotive for Arab regional order.

-Also, on the margins of the Summit, the Jordanians engaged in the role of bridge-builders in the Summit.

They succeeded in giving a boost to Saudi-Iraqi normalization; something which the Iranians would look at with great suspicion.

-Moreover, the margins of the Arab Summit also provided a venue for a summit meeting between Egypt, Jordan and Palestine to explore ways and means by which to bring the Palestinian issue back to the front burner of regional issues, with the American promise to address it. In this regard, it should be noted that despite the less than encouraging position of President Trump in this matter, the concerned Arab parties considered that they should not miss this opportunity, even if they may be invited to accept a different approach to the revival of the peace process. In this, they are backed by the vast majority of Arab countries. The continuous stalemate and marginalization of the Palestinian issue due to other regional developments since the beginning of the Arab Spring have had devastating effects on the Palestinian issue and could lead to more radicalization and a complete reshuffling of the cards with regards to the question of Palestine.

-The Final Declaration included *déjà vu* and repetitive phraseology on key perennial issues such as: the Palestinian issue, the Arab Peace Initiative, the peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis despite the remarkable absence of the Arabs from the Astana peace process, the importance of achieving stability in Libya despite the apparent differences among the Arab parties involved in the settlement of that conflict, combatting terrorism and the promotion of Arab economic cooperation and trade exchange. However, three important issues in the Declaration are worth noting: Firstly, there was a dual engagement approach of both the Iraqi Government and of different Iraqi factions

created by formulating an all inclusive approach to national reconciliation. This approach is one that is based on the participation of all Iraqi societal components on the basis of equality in the new regime, which is to be established as a condition for normalization with the rest of the Arab world. This new Iraqi regime, geared towards engagement with the Arab world, would replace the current regime dominated by Iran, according to the prevailing view in the Arab world. This new approach came as a departure from the long adopted Arab majority *vis a vis* Iraq, a policy which was based on a passive and disengaged attitude of 'wait and see' and of the conviction that Iraq was lost to Iran. This new proactive policy of a Saudi led coalition aims at politically confronting Iran in Iraq with the aim of curtailing and later neutralizing the influence of the former in Baghdad. Secondly, in the context of an emerging trend led by some Arab countries to engage Iran-but not without conditions-and thus to invite Iran to engage in a reconciliation process with the Arab countries on the basis of "Westphalian rules of conduct" among states. In this regard, the eighth paragraph of the Declaration did not mention Iran by name and omitted a direct open condemnation of her role. Instead, there was an enunciation of the principles of good neighborhood that should govern relations between the Arab countries with their neighbors, including condemnations of attempts at destabilization and at using the sectarian card to foster conflicts. The message embodied in this paragraph was very clear. Thirdly, the Declaration featured the Summit mandating the Council of Ministers of the Arab League to establish the necessary mechanism to provide assistance to Arab countries which host refugees. This was a long awaited decision, particularly for Lebanon, due to the humanitarian and security repercussions of this ongoing dramatic issue. Observers, not necessarily skeptical ones, will say it remains to be seen how much of this decision will be operational and implemented. The same could also apply to other issues of vital common interest,

such as Arab regional cooperation and integration of the many resolutions repeatedly adopted by previous Summits and which remained only on paper.

-Many observers expected the Summit, when dealing with the issue of terrorism and the different interrelated dimensions necessary for successfully tackling it as a grave danger, to adopt the courageous Declaration of the recent Al-Azhar Conference on "Freedom and Citizenship: Diversity and Integration". This Declaration underlined the importance of the concepts of citizenship, diversity and pluralism as the bases of equality and true co-existence, regardless of religion or creed. This is the strongest preventive remedy to shield Arab societies from the dangers of sectarianism as well as religious and other forms of radicalism that destroy the societal fabric of Arab states and render them vulnerable to ideologies of fragmentation, hatred, anarchy and violence.

What next?

The League of Arab States, like any regional or international organization mirrors the overall situation that exists at one point in time in the regional or international state system it represents. This directly affects the degree of "concrete results" it can produce, reflecting formal declaratory consensus that exists among key states in the region and which allows for the emergence of common policy priorities which must have committed and invested capabilities behind them. The Arab states today live in an anarchical regional order characterized by many multifaceted conflicts, tensions, and crises, plus different forms of war ranging from civil wars to wars by proxy to a regional Cold War. Such a situation has led to the proliferation of failed and failing states in the Arab World. Therefore, the weakness or lack of performance of the

Organization is a true expression of the state of relations among its members.

The history of the Arab League features a wide gap between the adoption of Arab collective decisions on one hand and their implementation by member states on the other hand. The absence of a mechanism of follow-up and accountability at the Organization's level is partly responsible for this phenomenon. It encourages what was mentioned earlier as passive non-committal support as long as it stops there and carries no national commitments. It is the famous formula of "no objection, no implementation" or "we support you on paper but not on the ground". Attempts at establishing such a mechanism were blocked by a number of states which refuse any regional institutional constraints on their sovereign decisions. Accordingly, most decisions are formulated in general symbolic terms that hardly become operational.

Despite the sociological solidarity that the common Arab identity entails, irrespective of its past ideological strength or weakness or current marginalization, there was no development in the Arab World of a strong political culture of regional cooperation, even of a gradual functional one. The Arab World lacks cooperation that reflects a firm conviction of a common interest in such a process of working together for the common good, regardless of political and other forms of differences that should not hinder such cooperation in the interests of all parties. Slogans that pay lip service often replace concrete programs or plans of action.

The logic of denial or of avoiding problem-solving prevails in the Arab multilateral diplomacy forums. This explains to a great extent the loss of credibility of any Arab collective decision in the eyes of the Arab public opinion and to the erosion of the image of the League of Arab States as an all-Arab actor in the Arab World and abroad.

In a highly globalized world that raises important challenges to different countries and regions and

in an Arab world torn by all kinds of conflicts, tensions and wars which threaten, among other things, the territorial integrity of some of its states, an Arab collective response to these challenges becomes a must.

A *sine qua non* condition to start putting the house in order necessitates holding an informal summit meeting. A meeting that aims at defining collective threats, challenges, opportunities and priorities and at developing understandings, not necessarily identical positions among different members on how to deal with these issues is greatly needed. Such a meeting could help develop policies and mechanisms for crisis avoidance and management. It will be important to have regular consultative summit meetings for crises preemption or crises prevention. Yet the question remains whether there is a firm conviction and hence, a willingness to work together as a strategic commitment and not on an off and on basis reflecting the interests of a particular key state or states at one particular juncture. If such a conviction develops it will become possible to work out a collective and comprehensive Arab vision. Such a vision will be at the basis of formulating common policies to address common challenges. A group of wise men, of Arab personalities commanding high respect and rich experience, could be set up by the suggested summit to act as a bridge-builder, facilitator and problem solver among different Arab states.

Current trends in the Arab World are not encouraging. The future will tell which road the Arab world and with it the League of Arab States will take.

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