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Seeding Conflict Prevention Mechanisms in the Middle East

MARCH 13, 2018 — MICHAEL WAHID HANNA

The Middle East is marked by various forms of state failure, civil conflict, interstate tensions, and transnational threats, and that reality is likely to remain a defining feature of the region for the foreseeable future. The region is also sorely lacking, perhaps uniquely, in its collective capacity to prevent and manage conflict. A full-fledged regional security architecture that includes robust conflict prevention mechanisms has long been seen as a desirable goal. Nonetheless, discussions of this goal often have focused on the most ambitious potential outcomes of regional security dialogue, or have made success almost wholly dependent on major strides toward peace and security, which have obviously proven elusive. This oft-noted gap is both a function of reliance on external actors, particularly the United States, and a spur for still more outside intervention in regional affairs.

In matters that may have material spillover effects on international security and global stability, major international players are likely to continue their extensive current involvement. Similarly, regional powers will continue to seek to maximize their independence and room for maneuver with respect to their most pressing regional priorities. However, many less far-reaching crises and disputes would benefit from early and effective regional engagement. Further, productive regional involvement could provide support for international and multilateral diplomacy and conflict prevention, management, and resolution—even when it comes to the most serious international crises emanating from the Middle East.¹ Such initial regional efforts might also provide the basic structures and mechanisms around which a more formalized regional security infrastructure could be built.

The absence and ineffectiveness of such regional engagement mechanisms are not simply technical matters of capacity, but reflect broader geopolitical dynamics and the lack of political will within the region. As such, the matter of building greater capacity itself is a political choice. However, even this highly constrained environment presents opportunities for regional efforts at conflict prevention, management, and resolution—and yet the lack of institutional capacity may make it difficult to grasp these fleeting openings.

With these limited openings in mind, willing countries in the Middle East and interested and influential outside parties should focus near-term attention on mundane, practical, incremental approaches to building conflict prevention capacity and mechanisms. Creating institutional links between the Arab League and other regional and international organizations, institutionalizing conflict prevention mechanisms, and undertaking more serious professional development and training are necessary (even if insufficient) steps to more effectively address regional conflict. A focus on even modest progress can have positive, practical impact.

These efforts also could provide the initial building blocks for an eventual regional security architecture. Although such low-key efforts can never substitute for the major diplomatic and political decisions needed to begin a serious, sustained regional security dialogue and build effective security institutions, they remain a prerequisite to more ambitious future

efforts and may promote the use of regional mechanisms to address regional crises and conflicts.

More broadly, the Middle East will need major political, cultural, and diplomatic breakthroughs to produce durable regional security—narrowed sectarian animus and conflict, peace between long-term belligerents, a grand bargain that can move the region past the collapse of the postcolonial Arab state system—but such achievements are out of reach in the near term. Until and unless they become possible, plenty of useful work can be done to create incremental institutional and other capacities to prevent and manage conflict. At best, such measures can one day be the foundation of a new regional security architecture. But failing that ambitious outcome, the measures described below can yield significant accomplishments in managing simmering regional conflicts and containing their fallout.

Order from Ashes

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The Arab League

Any discussion of regional capacity and existing mechanisms for conflict prevention must begin with the Arab League, which offers a template for understanding the factors that constrain regional cooperation. Currently, the Arab League receives its most focused public attention when pictures emerge from its annual summit meeting of various leaders sleeping during the proceedings.² This yearly occurrence and the derision it inspires are instructive and speak to the region’s fundamental lack of confidence in the organization and its mission. The League was established in 1945 and was the first such regional organization. Despite this longevity, its track record has been seen as underwhelming, particularly as other regional organizations in recent decades have gained greater coherence and provided a platform for greater regional cooperation.

The reasons for this state of affairs have been a subject of some scholarly debate and discussion.³ Myriad factors suggest that the Arab world could produce a functional and effective regional organization, as Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen argue:

First, the League of Arab States was the first regional organization established after 1945. Second, its members share a common language, identity, and culture. Third, there is an arguable shared threat in

*Israel and continuing suspicions of the West. Fourth, there have been expectations of joint gains from trade and commerce, although similar production patterns detracted from benefits achievable through complementarity. Such shared identities and interests would surely place the Arab states system high on most predictors of regional institutionalization.*⁴

Despite these linkages, which are “virtually unmatched by other regions in the world,”⁵ the organization has not been successful at regional institutionalization. The Arab League remains the region’s preeminent institution, with the largest membership, including twenty-two member states.⁶ The charter that established the League laid out three main goals for the organization: “To draw closer the relations between member states and co-ordinate their political activities with the aim of realizing a close collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries.”⁷

Despite this seemingly far-reaching mandate,⁸ the design of the Arab League, as has been frequently noted, has resulted in weak cooperation and limited integration. But as Barnett and Solingen argue, that design “should not be seen as an unintended outcome but instead as the result of the clear imperative of regime survival that led Arab leaders to prefer weak regional institutions.”⁹ From a historical perspective, as Malcolm Kerr observes, “ever since the second world war, popular political sentiment in the Arab world has been dominated by urgent appeals for Arab unity, while the field of activity between governments and parties has been dominated by bitter rivalry.”¹⁰ In institutional terms, this inherent weakness is reflected in the rules governing the Arab League’s council, in which each member state has one vote and binding decisions on all member states can only be taken through a unanimous vote.¹¹ Any decision reached by a majority vote is binding only on those states that accept the decision. In institutional terms, the initial basic design of the Arab League’s structures provided for a council composed of representatives of member states, special committees pertaining to the delineated activities of the League (which would need to be approved by the council), and a general secretariat.¹²

The Arab League was established with a clear directive to engage in conflict prevention and other kinds of peace and security activities. Article 5 of its charter includes a provision that “the Council shall mediate in a dispute which may lead to war between two member States or between a member State and another State in order to conciliate them.”¹³ However, the charter is silent on specific mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms.¹⁴ Despite political tensions in the Arab World and numerous instances of conflict with non-member states, there have been only limited instances of active interstate conflict and war between and among members of the Arab League.¹⁵

Marco Pinfari has suggested that conventional views of the Arab League are incomplete and that a closer examination of the data on Arab League performance in conflict management and resolution suggests “some circumscribed, yet relevant patterns of success.”¹⁶

*The League proved hesitant to mediate in civil conflicts when major regional powers were involved, as the ‘designed to fail’ hypothesis suggests, but [it also] failed to mediate in most inter-state wars in the Middle East primarily because one of the major warring parties was not, with few exceptions, a member state. On the other hand, the League intervened repeatedly in minor wars, and succeeded in promoting at least a partial settlement in 40 percent (8 out of 20) of the recorded boundary wars and political crises.*¹⁷



ARAB LEAGUE SECRETARY GENERAL NABIL ELARABY (3-L) AND LIBYAN MINISTER OF ECONOMY AHMAD AL-KUSHALI (2-R) ATTEND THE ARAB ECONOMY, FINANCE AND TRADE MINISTERS MEETING AS PART OF ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT AT ISHTAR SHERATON HOTEL ON MARCH 27, 2012 IN BAGHDAD, IRAQ. THE ARAB LEADERS WILL MEET IN BAGHDAD FOR THE 23RD REGULAR SESSION OF ARAB SUMMIT ON MARCH 29. SOURCE: ALI HAIDER-POOL/GETTY IMAGES.

Even this revisionist approach, however, suggests a modest record of success, but primarily reflects the limited number of disputes that its member states have been allowed to engage with owing to the procedural requirement for unanimity.

Limited efforts have been made to build out the institutional frameworks for the Arab League’s peace and security activities, but these efforts remain stunted. Most notably, in 2006 the Arab League sought to emulate the reforms successfully introduced by the African Union by adopting measures to establish an Arab Peace and Security Council intended to prevent, manage, and resolve regional conflicts.¹⁸ These reforms would have established the Arab League as the primary forum for the settlement of disputes¹⁹ and theoretically represented a step toward greater institutionalization of its conflict prevention, management, and resolution mechanisms.²⁰ The Arab Peace and Security

Council, which Arab League officials saw as a potential complement to the League's traditional reliance on the offices of the secretary general,²¹ was formally established in 2008. The Arab Peace and Security Council remains advisory in function, and as such, its recommendations are subject to Arab League Council approval; as of 2012, only twelve member states had adopted the new mechanisms.²² Further, some of the more focused innovations, such as the proposed establishment of a data bank, early warning system, and a "panel of the wise" (a selected group of experienced actors who are qualified and willing to act as conflict mediators) have yet to take shape. In sum, the reforms are mostly notional, but the resulting institutional steps nonetheless provide an existing basis and framework upon which reforms could be based if political will crystallizes in the future.

Despite its weak track record, the Arab League is still seen as the primary regional forum for regional security discussions and conflict prevention efforts. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which is often seen as a more successful subregional organization, has achieved some real successes, particularly in economic cooperation²³ and to a lesser and more fragile extent in collective security. In terms of its performance in preventing or resolving conflicts, the GCC has not been involved in mediating major interstate conflicts, for understandable reasons related to its mandate, composition, and capacity.²⁴ Even for the subregional disputes that it is credited with resolving, the mediation has largely been undertaken by key member states and not the organization itself.²⁵

The Gulf War and the Failure of Conflict Prevention

The events leading up to and following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 had profound ramifications for the Middle East that have shaped regional security dynamics for decades. The region had become accustomed to the interventions and engagement of outside powers, but the changes set in motion by the invasion altered the regional order and helped to further reliance on the United States as the region's primary security and diplomatic player. This was in large part a result of the unique sequence of events in that period. Untroubled by great power competition, the United States emerged from the Cold War as the sole global superpower and was increasingly free to project its power, including through its direct military intervention against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Although the declaration of the Carter Doctrine²⁶ in January 1980 had reflected a material shift in America's posture to the Gulf and its attitude toward its military role in the region, that shift would gain increased momentum in the aftermath of the Gulf War, which saw the United States establish a permanent military footprint in the Gulf, hosted by various Arab monarchies.²⁷

In effect, the United States became a regional party by dint of its permanent and extensive presence, fundamentally altering the region's security frameworks and relationships. That presence would expand further in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the March 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. Despite the rebalancing of

force allocation following the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, the U.S. military presence in the region has endured and has in some places deepened with the ongoing military operations against the Islamic State and other transnational terrorist organizations. This military presence shows no signs of disappearing any time soon, despite alarmist rhetoric about U.S. retrenchment and the abandonment of the region.

The change in America's regional profile also created much greater reliance on the United States. This dependency further ensured that the Middle East's moribund institutions would remain so, and in fact accelerated their decay. In retrospect, it remains unclear if even effective preventive diplomacy could have averted the invasion of Kuwait. There were misperceptions on all sides, particularly Iraq's views and understandings of the international community and its intentions.²⁸ The invasion had been preceded by increasing regional tensions following the end of the Iran-Iraq War in August 1988. After that war, Iraq's Saddam Hussein believed that his sacrifices during the conflict now positioned him for Arab leadership.²⁹ But he would become disenchanted when "Arab states behaved not as grateful friends, but as cold-blooded power balancers."³⁰ That disenchantment would grow into a near-conspiratorial paranoia that led him to believe that the sustainability of his regime was at stake. As tensions between Iraq and Kuwait escalated, Saudi Arabia and Egypt sought to dampen them through diplomacy and mediation. But those diplomatic interventions were limited, and other Arab states began serious preventive diplomacy only in July 1990, after Saddam Hussein issued an explicit threat to Kuwait in a public address.³¹ Even during this brief period of heightened diplomacy, Arab leaders appear to have seen Iraq's actions as coercive and intimidating but discounted the possibility of military invasion.³² Interestingly, Arab League secretary-general Chedli Klibi seems to have been among the few leaders in the region who saw the events of the summer of 1990 as a push toward war.³³

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, there was still a regional consensus for an Arab solution to the crisis.³⁴ But despite crisis diplomacy and an Extraordinary Arab League Summit in Cairo on August 10, 1990, it became clear that the League lacked unanimity, and hope for a regional solution diminished as the Iraqi position remained rigid. As a result, the Arab League was not in a position to lead collective security efforts to deal with such a major violation of international law. Further, as the prospect of outside military intervention gained coherence, the divisions within the Arab League rendered it a bystander as the United States began its preparations for a complex multicountry military operation. Understandably, the considerable international interests at stake shifted the primary focus of the conflict to the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the United States.

The war and its aftermath were a historical inflection point for the region, accelerating existing trends and exposing differing regional threat perceptions and interests. The failures of regional diplomacy to deal with and contain the crisis over Kuwait accelerated the reorientation away from meaningful regional diplomacy.

Opportunistic Engagements, Inconsistent Standards

Despite its well-deserved reputation for inaction, in recent years the Arab League has opportunistically broken with its orientation toward the status quo and the protection of state sovereignty. In the post-2011 environment, it occasionally has set aside its normal predispositions on sovereignty. At a time of regional upheaval, those policies seemed to be in keeping with the widespread (though not universal) public embrace of the uprisings and the political openings that they represented. These abrupt shifts on Libya and Syria saw the Arab League adopt activist positions on the internal matters of member states, and also paved the way for subsequent engagement and intervention by the international community. They did not, however, reflect evolving regional norms, but rather were attempts to harness momentary regional trends for geopolitical advantage.³⁵ When the Arab League took action, it merely reflected its powerful members' pursuit of their national interests, and not any change in the League's own capacity or direction.

In historical terms, the Arab League has not focused on the internal behavior of its member states and their approach to their citizenry—a hardly surprising choice in a region characterized by repressive, authoritarian regimes and widespread violations of rights.³⁶ Notable examples of this avoidance include the League's relative silence on the massacre of Islamists in Hama in 1982 by the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad, the atrocities committed by the regime of Saddam Hussein against Iraqi Kurds during the 1988 Anfal campaign, the indiscriminate violence unleashed by the Iraqi regime in its attempt to suppress and crush the antigovernment rebellions largely spearheaded by Shia and Kurds in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, or the ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity undertaken by Sudan in Darfur in 2003–4.³⁷ However, in the face of a linked media environment and growing popular outrage at government reactions to the uprisings, the Arab League selectively engaged on two crises—Libya and Syria—that presented strategic openings for a critical mass of key member states. The hypocrisy of these steps is glaring when compared with how these same states, and the League itself, approached other uprisings, such as those in Egypt and Bahrain.

In Libya in particular, there was no real discernible effort at conflict resolution. The widespread hostility to Muammar Qaddafi and his eccentric rule, coupled with the bottom-up pressures created by popular perceptions of the uprisings, produced unprecedented Arab League responses to the crisis that eventually would result in a UN-sanctioned no-fly zone. Following calls from Arab League secretary-general Amr Moussa for an end to violence, the Arab League moved rapidly to develop a proposed no-fly zone in early March 2011. At that point, the League still rejected the prospect of foreign intervention and suggested a possible no-fly zone jointly enforced by the Arab League and African Union. But this stance shifted rapidly in line with the policy preferences of the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia. On March 7, 2011, the Gulf States proposed a no-fly zone and called for an emergency meeting to discuss the possibility of an Arab League-backed no-fly zone. This was followed by an Arab League meeting that resulted in a call for the UNSC to impose a no-fly zone over Libya, which clearly played a major role in the latter's eventual adoption of that measure. This activist

approach to regional developments influenced the Arab League's subsequent if more cautious engagement with the growing crisis in Syria. In Syria, as with Libya, the twin pressures of popular opinion and geopolitics came together to produce Arab League assertiveness. As described in more detail below, the Arab League's hasty and flawed approach to the growing violence in Syria undermined the already dim prospects for effective engagement and intervention.

In other circumstances in which the 2011 uprisings produced major political change in parts of the region, even these cynical steps could have created an important, replicable precedent for the League's future engagements. But even though the uprisings produced their own form of regional cascade, their outcomes have been mostly disappointing and in many cases disastrous. In such circumstances, the Arab League's moves have had limited effects and have not encouraged a major normative shift away from its emphasis on state sovereignty and noninterference. The selective focus in the aforementioned cases, driven by the preferences of key member states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, nonetheless inserted the Arab League into regional affairs in ways that may affect the organization's future.

Despite these qualifications and the specific nature of the Arab League's engagement in Libya and Syria, under certain circumstances even a hidebound and reactionary organization such as the Arab League may opt for more aggressive institutional actions. This possibility suggests that even the Arab League could find itself called upon to engage meaningfully in future conflict prevention and management.

Arab League Mission to Syria

Although the Arab League displayed unexpected activism with regard to Syria, the short-lived and ill-fated Arab League Observer Mission in Syria was a poorly planned fiasco that highlighted the organization's lack of capacity in conflict prevention and mission design. A former senior Arab League official described the planning process as "rushed and woefully unprofessional," and lamented the mission's desultory performance.³⁸ He further elaborated that "capacity in this area is usually built on experience, which the Arab League as an institution has not been allowed to cultivate, and as a result there is very little pushing the organization to build that kind of capacity. And even if it did, it wouldn't be used. It's really a classic chicken-and-egg situation."³⁹ These bitter reflections encapsulate some of the challenges facing any effort to build conflict prevention capacity within the Arab League. However, this dilemma is complicated by the reality that when called upon in extremis, as was the case with the mission in Syria, the Arab League is not in a position to offer meaningful experience or engagement.

In the months leading up to the dispatch of the observer mission, the League engaged constantly with the Assad regime and made increasingly harsh public statements calling on it to end the violent crackdown against protesters. The League

drew up a peace plan and set a deadline, but then offered multiple extensions to its multiple ultimatums, responding to the regime's repeated requests for modifications to the plan as the death toll mounted. The Assad regime was criticized for using delaying tactics, and the international community put increasing pressure on the League to stand firm. The decision to suspend Syria, one of the League's founding members, was eventually approved but then repeatedly delayed, as were economic sanctions. Russia's decision to press Syria with a UNSC resolution was the tipping point that convinced Syria to finally agree to allow observers into the country.

On September 13, 2011, the Arab League called for "immediate change" in Syria and an end to the government crackdown on protesters. League secretary-general Nabil Elaraby met with Assad in Damascus that month, pressing him to end the violence so that the League could send in a fact-finding mission.⁴⁰ Following an October 16 League meeting, Syria was given fifteen days "to start a dialogue with the opposition at League headquarters in Cairo."⁴¹ By late October, amid a growing death toll and mounting external and internal pressure, the League announced that if Assad did not rein in his security forces by the end of the month it would vote to suspend Syria's membership in the organization.⁴²

On November 2, Syrian state media announced that Assad had agreed to a League plan to withdraw troops from cities and towns; release political prisoners who had been detained since the uprisings began; give access to members of the media, human rights groups, and Arab monitors; and begin talks with the opposition within two weeks.⁴³ A few days later, the government reported that it had released 553 detainees, and insisted that it was complying with the plan. But the days that followed turned out to be among the bloodiest since the unrest started,⁴⁴ with opposition activists reporting more than a hundred deaths across the country.⁴⁵

The Arab League voted at a meeting on November 12 to suspend Syria and implement economic and political sanctions against the government if it did not end its crackdown in three days' time.⁴⁶ Eighteen of its twenty-two members voted in favor, while Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria voted against and Iraq abstained.⁴⁷ After that initial vote and an attempt at bargaining from Assad, the member states met in Morocco on November 16, without Syria present, to confirm the suspension.⁴⁸ However, in a last-ditch attempt at diplomacy, the League gave Syria yet another three-day extension and offered to send civilian and military monitors to determine whether it was abiding by the plan.⁴⁹ Syria responded on November 18 with a request to the League to amend the proposed plan.⁵⁰ On November 24 the League again threatened sanctions if Syria did not agree to admit international monitors by the following day; a deadline that Syria promptly ignored.⁵¹ On November 27 the Arab League imposed economic sanctions on Syria, an unprecedented step against a member state.⁵² Again, eighteen of the twenty-two member states voted in favor while Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen voted against and Iraq abstained.⁵³

Outraged at the vote but yielding slightly to the pressure, Syria said on December 5 that it would agree to allow an Arab mission of military and civilian observers into the country on the condition that the League remove the sanctions.⁵⁴ The regime came under mounting pressure over the next few weeks. This time, Russia, a staunch ally, joined in, introducing a UNSC resolution calling on all sides in Syria to stop the bloodshed.⁵⁵ On December 19, the Syrian government signed the League initiative to send in observers, though sanctions remained in place.⁵⁶

The appointment of Sudanese general Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi as head of the League observer mission immediately drew widespread criticism. Dabi is a staunch loyalist of Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court for genocide and crimes against humanity for his government's policies in Darfur. Dabi served as head of intelligence under Bashir, and stands accused of helping to form the infamous “janjaweed” militias in Darfur,⁵⁷ where he held multiple government positions after fierce fighting broke out in 2003.⁵⁸ “What did we expect?” asked the former senior Arab League official, noting that this unforced error marred what was an already doomed deployment.⁵⁹

The mission also drew early scrutiny because of its small size—the original delegation had only sixty monitors—and its reliance on government transport.⁶⁰ Activists feared that they would not be able to speak freely because the monitors would be accompanied by Syrian government security details and government drivers, who were assumed to be working with security and intelligence agencies.⁶¹ The mission wound up appointing monitors from thirteen Arab countries and six Arab organizations. On December 22, monitors began arriving in Syria. Dabi reported that in initial meetings the Syrian government “confirmed its readiness to facilitate the mission in every way by allowing the free and safe movement of all of the observers throughout Syria,” and “affirmed its commitment ... to allow the entry to Syria of journalists and Arab and international media in accordance with the rules and regulations in force in the country.” Dabi held meetings with Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem and other officials. They agreed that the monitors would enter some areas without government representation.⁶²

Dabi started off badly by telling Reuters in a phone interview, after touring Homs with activists for two hours on December 27, that he hadn't seen “anything frightening” and that the “the situation seemed reassuring so far.”⁶³ The following day, video footage showed the group dodging bullets and being confronted by angry residents who displayed the dead body of a young boy they said had been killed by security forces.⁶⁴ The government announced that day that it had released more than seven hundred prisoners, while activists reported that more demonstrators had been killed in both Homs and Hama by government forces.⁶⁵ On December 29, the mission reported that six groups of observers traveled to Damascus, Homs, Rif Homs, Idlib, Dera'a, and Hama.⁶⁶ More protester deaths were reported the following day in Idlib, Hama, and the Damascus suburb of Douma, and a prominent Syrian dissident who had supported the

observer mission called for the removal of Dabi, given his human rights record.⁶⁷ Monitors were seen attending larger-than-normal Friday protests throughout the country on December 30. Activists reported that more than two dozen people were killed by government forces that day.⁶⁸

On January 1, the Arab Parliament, an advisory body to the League, called for the immediate withdrawal of the monitors. Chair Ali al-Salem al-Dekbas said that the mission was “giving the Syrian regime a cover to commit inhumane acts under the noses of the Arab League observers.”⁶⁹ By the following day, League secretary-general Nabil Elaraby conceded that the monitors had failed to stop Assad’s forces from killing protesters—contradicting a comment by Dabi, who said that his monitors had not seen government snipers.⁷⁰ Elaraby continued, however, to defend Dabi, calling him a “capable military man with a clean reputation.”⁷¹ On January 3, the mission announced that it would send fifty more monitors and set up a complaints department in Hama, though activists expressed doubt that the department would be safe from government surveillance.⁷² On January 5, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, Qatar’s premier and foreign minister, admitted that the mission had made mistakes but said that there was no intention of pulling monitors out of the country; he said the League was seeking technical help from the UN.⁷³

After a meeting of the League’s foreign ministers’ committee on January 8, at which Dabi presented the mission’s findings to date, the League called on “the Syrian government and various armed groups to immediately halt all forms of violence and to return to protesting peacefully so that the Arab League observers’ mission in Syria can succeed.”⁷⁴ The League decided at the meeting to expand the mission and keep it going at least until January 19. Dabi noted in his final report that, in the wake of the committee meeting, the mission faced “difficulties” both from government loyalists and the opposition.⁷⁵

On January 9, a group of observers were attacked by Assad supporters in the port city of Latakia and in the eastern city of Deir al-Zour. Eleven monitors were slightly wounded in Latakia when thousands surrounded their car, protesting the mission and chanting pro-Assad slogans.⁷⁶ One armored car was “completely crushed,” according to Dabi’s report. Elaraby condemned the attack and blamed the Syrian government for not providing adequate security. The Syrian government formally apologized for the incident and claimed that the events were not deliberate.⁷⁷ However, the following day Assad fanned the flames in a speech at Damascus University in which he ridiculed the Arab League and even dismissed the Gulf states as lacking culture.⁷⁸ Several monitors also resigned from the mission, including Anwar Malek of Algeria, who said in an interview with Al Jazeera that the mission “was a farce ... the regime orchestrated it and fabricated most of what we saw to stop the Arab League from taking action against the regime.”⁷⁹ He claimed that the Assad regime had not met any of the conditions in the League plan.

In the days before the mission technically ended on January 19, Assad issued an amnesty for crimes committed during the ten-month uprising,⁸⁰ and government tanks and armored vehicles pulled out of Zabadani, a town near Damascus.⁸¹ Violence continued to surge across the country, with the UN reporting that nearly four hundred people had been killed in the three weeks since the mission began.⁸² Dabi had a different story: at a press conference a few days later, he told reporters that “after the arrival of the mission, the intensity of violence began to decrease” and that his monitors had recorded only 136 deaths.⁸³ Dabi’s report stated that the mission confirmed on January 17 that “all military vehicles, tanks and heavy weapons had been withdrawn from cities and residential neighborhoods,” but that armored vehicles remained.⁸⁴

Days later, the League foreign ministers’ committee floated an ambitious new proposal for Syria, calling on Assad to hand power to his vice president, prepare to create a unity government with the opposition, and set early parliamentary and presidential elections.⁸⁵ Assad promptly dismissed the plan as a “conspiratorial scheme.”⁸⁶ The League also voted to extend and expand the mission and provide it with logistical and technical support. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, announced that it was pulling its citizens from the observer mission because the government had failed to execute any of the requirements from the original League peace plan.⁸⁷ Other Gulf states followed suit, reducing the number of monitors to 110.⁸⁸ On January 28, Nabil Elaraby announced that the League was suspending the mission after a renewed crackdown made it impossible for the monitors to do their job. Elaraby said that the decision stemmed from “a severe deterioration of the situation and the continued use of violence” and blamed the Syrian government for continuing to escalate militarily.⁸⁹ Elaraby, along with Qatar’s Al Thani, then traveled to New York to try to raise support for the League’s peace plan at the UNSC.⁹⁰

The Arab League’s poorly conceived and planned engagement was a failure and did little to encourage future efforts to prevent conflict. Some minimal levels of planning and competence will be required if any such future initiatives come to fruition. Even though no amount of competence and capacity could have overcome the challenges presented by Syria’s collapse into multisided civil and proxy war, it is not surprising that Assad was able to defy the Arab League without any consequence. His regime’s interactions with the UN in subsequent years were also marked by bureaucratic stalling techniques, threats of violence against international observers and workers, and insincere pledges that international bodies, by design, were obligated to take seriously. But the fact that even the League’s initial steps were marred by dubious personnel choices, rudimentary mission design, and insufficient capacity are a warning sign for future engagements and deployments. Further, the haphazard, ad hoc fashion in which this mission was designed and implemented left little imprint on the organization and did little to prepare it for future challenges.

Comparative Models



(L-R) JOINT SPECIAL ENVOY FOR SYRIA AND FORMER UNITED NATIONS (UN) SECRETARY GENERAL KOFI ANNAN, UN SECRETARY GENERAL BAN KI-MOON AND DR. NABIL EL-ARABY, SECRETARY-GENERAL, LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES, SPEAK DURING A NEWS CONFERENCE AFTER THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL HELD CONSULTATIONS REGARDING THE UN SUPERVISION MISSION IN SYRIA ON JUNE 7, 2012 AT UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS IN NEW YORK CITY. EARLIER TODAY, UN MONITORS WERE SHOT AT IN SYRIA WHEN THEY ATTEMPTED TO VISIT THE SCENE OF A REPORTED MASSACRE IN HAMA PROVINCE. SOURCE: ANDREW BURTON/GETTY IMAGES.

Some of the challenges facing the Middle East are by no means unique. Other loose security communities and similarly situated organizations have sought to create conflict prevention mechanisms and structures. These comparative experiences demonstrate the kinds of efforts that may be applicable in the Middle East and the ways in which the building of institutions and the establishment of conflict prevention mechanisms may provide a platform for future actions.

The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) offers one example. The ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) published two blueprints in 2009 and 2015 outlining a plan to achieve its goal of preserving peace and security among ASEAN's ten member states. The community has agreed in principle to promote the exchange of observers in military and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief exercises; ensure the use of the Direct Communications Link (a secure hotline between ASEAN countries' defense ministers); and coordinate on peacekeeping operations, maritime security, military medicine, counterterrorism, and humanitarian mine action. The forward-looking 2025 APSC Blueprint encourages the community to address urgent issues or crisis situations through special meetings including via video conferencing, and to build on existing mechanisms to enhance early warning capabilities. The 2025 document lays out a number of "nontraditional" security issues on which the APSC should cooperate, partly by coordinating law

enforcement agency efforts: drug and human trafficking, arms smuggling, sea piracy, money laundering, international economic crimes, and cybercrimes. It places significant emphasis on maintaining peace in the South China Sea and preserving Southeast Asia's status as a nuclear-weapon-free zone.⁹¹

The APSC established the Jakarta-based ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR) in 2012. The AIPR is tasked with research activities, building capacity, and sharing information on conflict management and conflict resolution. The goal is for the AIPR to develop a network of experts for the community to use as a resource for policy recommendations on conflict-related matters. Though the institute is still in its formative stage, it has hosted a number of workshops and symposiums on peace and reconciliation processes, women's participation in peace processes and conflict resolution, and the specific dangers to women and children in conflict situations.⁹²

Another example that the Arab League might follow is that of the Vienna-based Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The CPC, which was established in 1990 and employs sixty staff members, facilitates political dialogue among the OSCE's fifty-seven member states; assists with the implementation of confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs); supports field operations; provides advice and analysis on conflict-related issues; and supports negotiation, mediation, and dialogue-facilitation efforts. The CPC houses the OSCE Situation Room, which monitors security and stability developments in the region around the clock and plays a vital role during times of crisis. It also plans the establishment, restructuring, and closures of OSCE's field operations, serves as their primary link with other OSCE structures, and coordinates with other international organizations at the regional level.⁹³

To support the OSCE's agreements on CSBMs, the CPC organizes sixteen annual exchanges of information on politico-military activities, including inventories of major military equipment, conventional arms transfers, and defense budgets and expenditures. All of the information is exchanged securely over an electronic network managed by the CPC. The CPC helps member states safely manage and destroy small arms, light weapons, and stockpiles of conventional ammunition, providing technical and managerial expertise and facilitating requests for assistance between member states. It also offers assistance to states in their international commitments to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.⁹⁴

The UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) was established in 2007 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Though it was founded at the initiative of five Central Asian states, it is slightly different from other regional security organizations in that it is administered under the United Nations. The UNRCCA's priorities are international terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking, organized crime, and environmental degradation (mainly around transboundary water management). It facilitates dialogue on conflict resolution and prevention, and serves as a

link with international organizations operating in the region. On counterterrorism, the UNRCCA and the UN Counter--Terrorism Implementation Task Force developed a Joint Plan of Action in 2011, and UNRCCA has since participated in workshops on the issue and holds annual strategic dialogues with international experts to develop recommendations on conflict prevention. The UNRCCA has also organized a number of preventive diplomacy trainings for parliamentarians and young diplomats.⁹⁵ Most notable for present purposes, soon after its establishment in 2010 the UNRCCA unexpectedly swung into action when interethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan left four hundred dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. Coordinating with his counterparts from the European Union (EU) and the OSCE, UNRCCA head Miroslav Jenča played a prominent role in helping the Kyrgyz government bring the violence to an end and enact necessary political reforms.⁹⁶ The UNRCCA also shares information and maintains regular contact with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, as the situation there has a direct impact on stability in Central Asia.⁹⁷



OSCE MONITORS GETTING READY FOR PATROL IN THE AREA OF MARIUPOL, EASTERN UKRAINE, IN JANUARY 2018. SOURCE: OSCE/EVGENIY MALOLETKA.

Collaborative and Incremental Capacity-Building

In thinking about potential future scenarios within the region, particularly with respect to the Middle East's ongoing crises, it is worth considering potential opportunities for collaborative capacity-building with other multilateral organizations even if such efforts are deliberately limited at the outset.

The most obvious opportunity for such a collaborative effort would be with the African Union, which has a much more robust peace and security architecture and extensive experience in crisis management and peacekeeping. The mandates of both organizations geographically overlap, and cooperation and coordination should already be a consistent priority. Some formal institutional linkages between the African Union and the Arab League already exist, but the lack of effective cooperation between them can impede conflict prevention efforts. Pinfari argues that “in cases in which two parties in a conflict perceive the League and the AU [African Union] respectively as their preferred mediators—as is the case in southern Somalia—such lack of coordination may strongly impair the effectiveness of their conflict resolution strategies.”⁹⁸

The Arab League and African Union signed a joint “Declaration and Programme of Action on Afro-Arab Cooperation” after the first Afro-Arab Summit, held in Cairo in 1977.⁹⁹ The programme stipulated that the organizations would exchange information on a regular basis and give each other observer status during their respective meetings when matters of joint interest were discussed.¹⁰⁰ It also affirmed a common commitment to noninterference in the internal affairs of other states. A draft general agreement on Arab League–African Union cooperation was put forward but never signed. Meetings of the Permanent Commission for Arab-African Cooperation were held regularly at first, but there was a ten-year hiatus between 1991 and 2001, and meetings were not held regularly again until 2009, when calls for increased cooperation began to pick up. In late 2009 an Arab-African ministerial meeting was held on the fighting in Darfur.¹⁰¹

Three decades after the inaugural summit, the second Afro-Arab Summit met in Sirte, Libya, in 2010, on the heels of an Arab League meeting in the same city. Muammar Qaddafi presided over both. Development issues dominated the discussion, but the meeting reaffirmed members’ views on South Sudan’s looming independence referendum (which was roundly condemned), dedication to peaceful means of conflict settlement in areas such as the war in Somalia and conflicts over Nile water distribution, and counterterrorism efforts.¹⁰² The Sirte Declaration recognized the “growing and notable role” of the Arab League in Darfur humanitarian relief, and expressed appreciation for joint efforts at reconciliation in the Comoros. It called on the international community to mobilize more resources to aid the AU peacekeeping mission in Somalia and emphasized the need to establish a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free (WMD-free) zone in the Middle East.¹⁰³ A thirty-page “Afro-Arab Joint Action Plan 2011–2016” was adopted, replacing the 1977 joint declaration and program of action.¹⁰⁴ Following the summit, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon said in a report to the General Assembly on AU peacekeeping operations that the Union and the Arab League were discussing setting up an Afro-Arab peace facility for the Union’s conflict prevention activities and peacekeeping operations.¹⁰⁵

The third Afro-Arab summit met in Kuwait in late 2013, and again condemned terrorism in all its forms and called for more sharing of intelligence between Africa and the Arab world.¹⁰⁶ Yet the “Kuwait Declaration” released after the summit does not mention the upheaval the region had been experiencing since 2010. The summit focused mainly on economic and development cooperation, and the host, Kuwaiti emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, even removed the topic of “political and peace security” from the agenda.¹⁰⁷

In November 2015, the general secretariat of the Arab League and the Commission of the African Union met in Cairo for consultations specifically on political, peace, and security issues of mutual interest. In a joint press release, the organizations said that they had discussed “institutionalizing their cooperation in the area of peace and security.”¹⁰⁸ They agreed to consider the possibility of joint field missions, and discussed crises and conflicts in the Comoros, Darfur, Libya, Somalia, and South Sudan. They met again with the UN Support Mission in Libya in October 2016 to “discuss the situation in Libya and the means to further cooperation between the three organizations in order to advance the political process and assist Libya in its democratic transition.”¹⁰⁹ Follow-up trilateral meetings on Libya were held in March and May 2017.¹¹⁰

The fourth Afro-Arab Summit, held in Equatorial Guinea in November 2016, was disrupted when a delegation from the Polisario Front, the Western Sahara separatist group, came to the summit and Morocco walked out, along with Bahrain, the Emirates, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen.¹¹¹ The summit’s declaration, however, ended up including calls for heightened cooperation on security, in addition to reiterating the condemnation of terrorism and calling for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East. It called for more meetings and sharing of information on issues related to conflict resolution and postconflict intervention, enhanced cooperation in Arab and African peacekeeping training, and coordination on program development for conflict prevention.¹¹²

Despite these formal linkages and regular calls for further institutionalizing cooperation between the two organizations, very little practical collaboration has taken place: “We have to move away from the general political statements that have characterized this relationship and start dealing with practical considerations. We have Libya, Sudan, and Somalia, and yet very little has been done to establish mechanisms for institutional cooperation. That is a major missed opportunity and gap.”¹¹³ The rising tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over the construction of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the possibility of reduced water flow to Egypt¹¹⁴ are another potential flashpoint that could benefit from closer cooperation.

This sort of arrangement would also help neutralize some of the political sensitivities that often accompany cooperation with other multilateral organizations, particularly Western organizations. It might also provide a less politically sensitive conduit for indirect funding coordinated through the African Union.¹¹⁵ Although the lack of political will is clearly the

primary obstacle to institutionalizing capacity at the Arab League, controversies within the organization regarding funding levels and support certainly undermine any nascent efforts to do so.

Another potential opportunity may arise with respect to some of the region's most intractable conflicts, such as those in Libya and Syria. Although the complexity of these conflicts, the associated regional interests, and the preponderant role of major outside countries limit opportunities for regional engagement, creative efforts might allow for some degree of regional involvement. Writing in 2012, Richard Gowan noted that "it is conceivable that the Arab League could find itself in charge of a military deployment long before it is ready to do so."¹¹⁶ The Arab League has previously deployed peacekeeping forces. In 1961, following Kuwait's independence from Great Britain and rising tensions with Iraq stemming from Iraqi territorial claims,¹¹⁷ Great Britain sought to deter Iraqi action by mobilizing its own forces. Iraq then agreed not to attack Kuwait if the British forces withdrew.¹¹⁸ The League subsequently deployed a force of 2,337 and helped avert an Iraqi military attack, although Iraq never fully conceded its original territorial claims.¹¹⁹ In 1976, the Arab League authorized the deployment of the Arab Deterrent Force, which sought to implement a cease-fire to stem further escalation of Lebanon's growing civil war.¹²⁰ Syrian troops had already entered Lebanon, but their presence was formalized by incorporation into the Arab League force. The original deployment of 25,100 included troops from Libya, Saudi Arabia, South Yemen, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.¹²¹ Starting with Libya in 1976, the contributing countries began pulling their forces out of Lebanon, and by the spring of 1979 all of the contributors but Syria had left Lebanon.¹²² Syrian forces would remain in Lebanon, to disastrous effect, until 2005.

More recent events have rendered the possibility of an Arab League deployment less likely, but serious consideration should be given to involving the Arab League in potential future UN peacekeeping operations in crisis areas.¹²³ As UN political missions already exist and have taken a leading role in both Syria and Libya, future focus could consider a possible hybrid peacekeeping mission. In practice, the Arab League would not make an expansive contribution to any sort of hybrid mission, but rather would provide consultation and collaboration in the planning phases. This sort of joint mission would provide opportunities for involving Arab League personnel and, more important, would give the Arab League exposure to the planning and deployment of a complex peacekeeping mission. In addition to building regional support for UN efforts, such active hybrid cooperation would be an important capacity-building opportunity.

Previous opportunities for that sort of collaboration, however, have been eschewed. In February 2012, the UN and the Arab League appointed former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan as the joint special envoy of the UN and the Arab League on the Syrian crisis, following the suspension of the League observer mission in Syria.¹²⁴ Several weeks after the initial announcement, the UN and the Arab League appointed Nasser al-Kidwa as deputy joint special envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States on Syria. Kidwa, a veteran Palestinian diplomat who had previously served as the minister for Foreign Affairs of the Palestinian National Authority,¹²⁵ led much of the initial work with the Syrian opposition and

efforts to expand their organizational umbrella, assisted by several staff members who were effectively appointed by the Arab League.¹²⁶ In practice, however, the mission functioned as a UN mission and the Arab League's institutional involvement was symbolic.¹²⁷ As a former member of the mission noted, "The role of the League was more symbolic and political than operational. The notion of a joint mission provided legitimacy and continuity that was seen as needed in 2012 due to the UN principle of subsidiarity and the leading role the League had played in the crisis since August 2011, which needed to be respected given the interest in developing a united international response." This remained the case despite the subsequent appointment of the distinguished Arab League and UN diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi as Annan's successor in August of the same year.¹²⁸ As a result, the effort was a missed opportunity for limited but potentially useful forms of collaboration and capacity building.

Future opportunities for this kind of cooperation with the United Nations would be particularly salient for the Middle East because the region's conflicts have required a disproportionate involvement of the United Nations in general and of the UN Security Council in particular. The Middle East also occupies a disproportionate share of the foreign policy focus of the United States, Europe, and Russia.

The EU has taken various small steps to establish mechanisms for institutional engagement with the Arab League. Prior to 2012, and despite some institutional contacts, relations were not governed by any structures and were mostly ad hoc.¹²⁹ Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, the EU and its member states became more interested in formalizing interactions with the Arab League, and in November 2012 EU and Arab League foreign ministers met in Cairo and issued a joint political declaration that established a periodic meeting structure at ministerial, ambassadorial, and senior official levels, with the aim of institutionalizing contacts between the organizations.¹³⁰ In 2014, the EU and the Arab League established a strategic dialogue focused on regional security issues.

As part of the 2012 meeting, they also agreed to a work program. The most notable outcome of that agreement on sectoral cooperation has been the assistance provided by the European External Action Service to build a situation room for crisis management.¹³¹ The impetus for this initiative was twofold. First, it was meant to create a direct line of communication between European diplomats and actors on the ground. As a senior European official noted at the time, "If there is a terrorist attack, for instance, we need to know who to talk to. We have had huge difficulties in the past to find out exactly what is happening with European citizens on the ground. . . . We need reliable people on the other side of the line."¹³² Second, it sought to build out the Arab League's crisis management infrastructure, including the provision of basic equipment such as computers, screens, and satellite communications.¹³³ The stated expectation was that Arab countries, in the first instance, and Europeans would create linkages with the facility to develop a regional center that

would collect information in crisis situations.¹³⁴ The incremental construction of this sort of institutional infrastructure may have humble ambitions, but it can form a basis for expansion and provide a platform for coordinating future crisis management and conflict prevention actions.

Although the physical infrastructure has been put in place, it has yet to play a meaningful role in any crisis management efforts. The provision of the hardware and equipment needed to establish such facilities is not the same as the actual institutionalization of those capabilities, and the impact of the new infrastructure will be limited unless the capabilities are incorporated into the structures of the Arab League. As a senior Egyptian diplomat put it, “Capacity-building now is really only at the level of a few individuals and the construction of facilities, but without any serious institutional basis or framework.”¹³⁵

Other efforts at institutional collaboration, including with the World Bank, the OSCE, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, offer additional pathways to potentially productive activities and cooperation. However, in light of the Arab League’s current capacity and historical track record, it is unlikely that it will proactively seek opportunities to meaningfully contribute to “plug-and-play” peace operations,¹³⁶ in which international and regional organizations contribute relevant assets in an ad hoc fashion without centralized structures. Instead, to overcome the political and organizational impediments to participation, interested parties and advocates within and outside the region would need to actively propose such novel structures and seek out even limited Arab League involvement.

Not all efforts at capacity-building need be housed within the Arab League, although it remains the region’s primary focus for regional diplomacy and conflict prevention. Building up a cadre of trained professionals is an important step in any case, and the Arab world has existing organizations that can undertake much of that work. These organizations also represent a convenient point of contact for external funders, which provide a significant portion of their operating budget. Two such examples are the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCCPA) in Egypt and the Peace Operations Training Center (POTC) in Jordan.

The CCCPA, formerly the Cairo Regional Center for Training on Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping in Africa, was founded in 1994 under the auspices of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The CCCPA primarily supports African local, national, regional, and continental actors, facilitating efforts of preventive diplomacy, conflict resolution, postconflict resolution, and peace-building. The CCCPA is accredited as a Center of Excellence by the African Union. In recent years it has begun to focus more extensively on the Arab world and the Arab League. It is both a think tank and a training center, providing training in peacekeeping, counter-radicalization and counterextremism, and border management. The CCCPA trains Egyptian troops and observers for deployment in UN and African Union peacekeeping missions, and also provides workshops to the Arab League on writing reports and briefing techniques.¹³⁷

The POTC was founded in 1996 under the Jordanian Armed Forces' Directorate of Joint Military Training. It has trained more than seventy-five thousand troops and observers from Jordan and its allies before deployment to UN peacekeeping operations. It cooperates closely with the U.S. Enhanced International Peacekeeping Capabilities program, and has conducted several courses in cultural awareness training for foreigners, mainly from the United States. Other courses provided by the POTC include law of armed conflict; election security in conflict areas; and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. In 2010, the center completed construction on the Arab Training Village, a conflict simulation center funded by the United States. It received NATO accreditation in 2011.¹³⁸

Engaging beyond the Arab World

Any regional security dialogue or institutionalization of conflict prevention mechanisms in the Middle East will have to confront the challenge of how and when to incorporate non-Arab states. Despite the significant hurdles to such engagement, failure to engage will limit the effectiveness and reach of conflict prevention efforts. A cursory examination of the region's current conflicts and geopolitical divides makes it clear that non-Arab states are important players in and at times are the most significant drivers of conflict. Their eventual inclusion in regional security efforts will be critical to conflict mediation and resolution initiatives and future conflict prevention.

This process, particularly at the level of the Arab League, will likely lag behind the efforts of individual countries that may be more proactive in engaging non-Arab parties on regional security matters. Such engagement continues to occur in ad hoc ways, including through myriad Track Two initiatives,¹³⁹ but the political constraints on the Arab League mean that its formal participation will hinge on major regional shifts. This reality is exemplified by the Arab League's involvement with the Arab Peace Initiative, which was announced in Beirut at the Arab League Summit in March 2002.¹⁴⁰ The initiative was sponsored by Saudi Arabia and offered to extend Arab recognition of Israel, normalize ties with it, and end the Arab-Israeli conflict following the completion of a two-state solution and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories. The initiative was taken up again at the 2007 Arab League summit in Riyadh.¹⁴¹ Although the initiative represents a major shift in Arab approaches to the conflict, its contingent and collective nature suggests that the Arab League will have space and license to engage with non-Arab regional countries only in the wake of conflict cessation and regionalized normalization. The impediments to engaging with Turkey and Iran are not as structural in nature as those with respect to Israel, but they remain daunting.

Nonetheless, the Arab League should be included, as appropriate, in regional Track Two initiatives. There is wide scope for such inclusion, particularly on technical regional security matters. In aspirational terms, the Arab League would extend observer status to non-Arab regional states. In regional security terms, inclusion of those countries in a more

formal capacity would represent a much later and mature stage of any effort at institutionalizing a robust, serious regional security architecture.

Conclusion

Regional political realities and the elevation of state sovereignty above all other considerations have and will continue to hinder the institutionalization of conflict prevention structures and mechanisms. Despite understandable skepticism about the utility and feasibility of institution-building, particularly at an acute moment of reactionary sentiment and regionalized conflict, there is space for incremental yet constructive steps to build regional capacity for conflict prevention, crisis management, and postconflict reconstruction. The need is severe and will remain so for years. Several conflict-stricken countries in the region, such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen, likely will require extended external support for years to come. That support may not be limited to conflict mediation and resolution efforts, but could encompass prosaic but critical field and technical operations such as disarmament and destruction of small arms, light weapons, and conventional ammunition.

Whether as a result of opportunism, major shifts in the Middle East's geopolitics, or the emergence of greater dynamism within the Arab League's leadership, the opportunity to actively engage with the region's conflicts may arise or be forced upon regional organizations. Yet without some degree of preparatory institution- and capacity-building, the region will again be poorly prepared to deal with such challenges, as the ill-fated Arab League observer mission in Syria disastrously demonstrated. To avoid a repeat of that scenario, regional and international parties must begin that longer-term process of preparation. In 2008, the Arab League, through the offices of then Secretary-General Amr Moussa, was unexpectedly able to contribute to the resolution of Lebanon's presidential crisis. That effort, enabled by the Arab Peace and Security Council, demonstrates the ways in which institutional reform can have small but positive impacts.¹⁴² More recent efforts at Arab League mediation in 2009 in Yemen and in 2009–2010 between Egypt and Algeria were rejected by the parties,¹⁴³ and reflect the abiding reality that mediation still requires the consent of the parties involved.

The Arab League's difficulties in building cooperative security frameworks are well known. As James Worrall notes, doing so “between 22 diverse states with widely differing levels of economic success, different political systems, and [a] whole host of external alliances, which have linked the region to wider geopolitical struggles” has proven difficult.¹⁴⁴ It is far too easy to mock and lament the state of the Arab League and the Middle East's other multilateral regional organizations. But as with the region's politics and geopolitics, pessimism, defeatism, and apathy do not make for a prudent course of policy action.

COVER IMAGE: ARAB FOREIGN MINISTERS MEET AT THE ARAB LEAGUE NOVEMBER 10, 2002 IN CAIRO,

EGYPT. THE MINISTERS WERE MEETING TO DISCUSS THE NEW UNITED NATIONS RESOLUTION ON DISARMING IRAQ. SOURCE: NORBERT SCHILLER/GETTY IMAGES.

Notes

1. See Thi Hai Yen Nguyen, "Beyond Good Offices? The Role of Regional Organizations in Conflict Resolution," *Journal of International Affairs* 55, no. 2 (2002): 2. "Both ASEAN and OAS were active, flexible and effective in the peace processes in Cambodia and Haiti. Although the UN Security Council and major powers made the final settlement for both conflicts, the contributions of the two organizations were remarkable and make the case for regional organizations in conflict prevention and resolution."
2. Rosie Gray, "Was Mohamed Morsi Literally Asleep at the Arab League Summit?" *BuzzFeed*, March 16, 2013, https://www.buzzfeed.com/rosiegray/was-mohamed-morsi-literally-asleep-at-the-arab-league-summit?utm_term=.au442K0QV#.xa1JkBLN3; Mahmoud Eskaf, "Photos: Arab Leader Sleeping during Arab League Summit," *Middle East Observer*, July 26, 2016, <https://www.middleeastobserver.org/2016/07/26/photos-arab-leader-sleeping-during-arab-league-summit/>; and Rose Troup Buchanan, "A Bunch of World Leaders Fell Asleep at This International Summit and the Photos are Amazing," *BuzzFeed*, March 30, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/rosebuchanan/not-woke?utm_term=.xuROXRkKy#.jknmjkKdR.
3. See, e.g., Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen, "Designed to Fail or Failure to Design? The Origins and Legacy of the Arab League," in *Crafting Cooperation: Regional Institutions in Comparative Perspective* eds. Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 180–220; Farah Dakhllallah, "The League of Arab States and Regional Security: Towards an Arab Security Community?" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 3 (2012): 393–412; and Marco Pinfari, "Nothing but Failure? The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council as Mediators in Middle Eastern Conflicts," *Crisis States Working Papers Series* no. 2, Working Paper no. 45, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/research/crisisStates/download/wp/wpSeries2/WP452.pdf>.
4. Barnett and Solingen, "Designed to Fail or Failure to Design?" 180 (footnote omitted).
5. Dakhllallah, "The League of Arab States and Regional Security," 393.
6. James Worrall, *International Institutions of the Middle East: The GCC, Arab League, and Arab Maghreb Union* (London: Routledge, 2017). The Arab League comprises (in order of accession) Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, Algeria, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Mauritania, Somalia, Palestine, Djibouti, and the Comoros. Based on its charter, membership in the organization is open to every independent Arab State. Eritrea, Brazil, Venezuela, and India have observer status.
7. *Charter of Arab League*, League of Arab States, Article 2, March 22, 1945, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3ab18.html> (full original text, in translation; accessed October 30, 2017); original Arabic version available at <http://www.lasportal.org/ar/aboutlas/Documents/20%ميثاق%20جامعة%20الدول%20العربية%20و%20ملحقاته.pdf>.

8. The charter further enumerates the potential scope of the League's activities, including "close co-operation of the member States with due regard to the structure of each of these States and the conditions prevailing therein, in the following matters: (a) Economic and financial matters, including trade, customs, currency, agriculture and industry; (b) Communications, including railways, roads, aviation, navigation, and posts and telegraphs; (c) Cultural matters; (d) Matters connected with nationality, passports, visas, execution of judgments and extradition; (e) Social welfare matters; (f) Health matters." Ibid.
9. Barnett and Solingen, "Designed to Fail or Failure to Design?" 181.
10. Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War, 1958-1967: A Study of Ideology in Politics* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).
11. *Charter of Arab League*, Article 7. The one exception to this rule of unanimity is in the case of aggression committed by a member state against another member state, in which case the vote of the aggressor state will not be counted in determining unanimity. Ibid., Article 6.
12. Worrall, *International Institutions of the Middle East*, 47. Worrall notes that the Charter of the Arab League has only twenty articles and three short annexes. In contrast, he highlights that the Charter of the United Nations includes 111 articles and nineteen chapters.
13. *Charter of Arab League*, Article 5.
14. Hesham Youssef, "Mediation and Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: The Role of the Arab League," *Yearbook on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)*, ed. Institut für Friedensforschung und Sicherheitspolitik an der Universität Hamburg (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 300.
15. "Tensions between Arab States are legion but they are often expressed more through rhetoric, posturing or by covert participation in proxy wars than by invasion and or direct conflict." Worrall, *International Institutions of the Middle East* 57.
16. Pinfari, "Nothing but Failure?," 12.
17. Ibid., 2.
18. Dakhllallah, "The League of Arab States and Regional Security," 411.
19. Worrall, *International Institutions of the Middle East* 65.
20. Dakhllallah, "The League of Arab States and Regional Security," 411.
21. "'Until now, the Arab League has been a forum for dialogue but has never really intervened in regional conflicts except on a very high political level and through the Offices of the Secretary General.'" Dakhllallah, quoting Dr. Saeed al-Boromi, then the director of the Arab Peace and Security Council, in "The League of Arab States and Regional Security," 411.
22. Worrall, *International Institutions of the Middle East* 66.
23. Ibid., 123.
24. Pinfari, "Nothing but Failure?" 15-16.
25. Ibid., 17.
26. F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57.

27. Ibid., 88.
28. Claude Rakisits, "The Gulf Crisis: Failure of Preventive Diplomacy," in *Building International Community*, ed. Kevin Clements and Robin Ward (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 58.
29. Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* 89.
30. Ibid., 89.
31. Ibid., 67.
32. Ibid., 69.
33. Ibid., 69.
34. Ibid., 69.
35. Michael Wahid Hanna, "The Arab League: First Steps toward New Norms," *World Politics Review*, May 22, 2012, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/11978/the-arab-league-first-steps-toward-new-norms>.
36. Hanna, "The Arab League."
37. Ibid.
38. Former senior Arab League official, interview with the author, October 2, 2017.
39. Ibid.
40. "Arab League Parliament Urges Syria Suspension," *Al Jazeera English*, September 20, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/09/201192017594330402.html>.
41. "Arab League: Deploy Civilian Monitors in Syria," *Human Rights Watch*, October 26, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/26/arab-league-deploy-civilian-monitors-syria>.
42. Nada Bakri, "Defectors Claim Attack that Killed Syria Soldiers," *New York Times*, October 26, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/27/world/middleeast/army-defectors-in-syria-take-credit-for-deadly-attack.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FArab%20League>.
43. Liz Sly, "Arab League Announces Peace Plan for Syria," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/arab-league-announces-peace-plan-for-syria/2011/11/02/gIQAKBm6fM_story.html.
44. Anthony Shadid, "TimesCast November 11, 2011," *New York Times*, November 11, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/multimedia/100000001166407/timescast-november-11-2011.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FArab%20League>.
45. Nada Bakri, "Protesters Urge Arab League to Suspend Syria as Deaths Mount," *New York Times*, November 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/12/world/middleeast/syrian-protesters-killed-during-street-protests-demanding-arab-league-suspend-syria.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FArab%20League>.
46. Neil MacFarquhar, "Arab League Votes to Suspend Syria over Crackdown," *New York Times*, November 12, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/world/middleeast/arab-league-votes-to-suspend-syria-over-its-crackdown-on-protesters.html>.
47. David Batty and Jack Shenker, "Syria Suspended from Arab League," *Guardian*, November 12, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/12/syria-suspended-arab-league>.

48. Anthony Shadid, "TimesCast November 16, 2011," *New York Times*, November 16, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/multimedia/100000001175056/timescast-november-16-2011-.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FArab%20League>.
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