Arab League and the Management of the Israel-Palestine Conflict, 2016-2023

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the Arab League and the management of the Israel-Palestine conflict and specifically explained how the internal dynamics of the League undermine its political will and capacity to effectively mediate in the conflict. There is a connection between strong institutions and effective regional cooperation and sadly, most Arab League member states have weak institutions which means that these countries' leaders prioritize regime security at home over any collective regional interest or responsibility. It is in this context that we used the weak institutional framework to explain the Arab League's management of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Data used for this study are qualitative and generated from relevant literature using the documentary method of data collection. We argued in this paper that first, improvement in the relations between Israel and some Arab League's member states account for the League's limited involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict mediation process. Secondly, Arab League in recent times have been consumed with internal friction that it is unable to come up with a unified strategy for addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict. Internal challenges faced by member states mean that they mostly prioritize internal security over collective or regional security. We recommended that the Arab League should make Israel's commitment to a two-state solution a requirement for its member states to normalize relations with Israel, and review its charter so that its resolutions on Palestine have a binding force.

Keywords: Arab League, Israel-Palestine Conflict, Weak Institutions, Two-state Solution and Regional Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The Arab League (formally the League of Arab States), is a regional organization in the Arab world which was formed on 22 March 1945 in Cairo, Egypt. It began originally with six member states (Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) but currently made up of 22 members (Barnett & Solingel, 2007). The current members include Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arad Emirate and Yemen. Presently, there are seven observer states that include Armenia, Brazil, Chad, Eritrea, Greece, India and Venezuela. These observer states have been invited to participate in some selected Arab League session, but do not hold voting privileges (Cable Network News, 2013). The League's main goal is to draw closer the relations between member states and co-ordinate collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries (Ashish, 2006).

The first major action of the Arab League after its formation was the joint opposition to the emergence of the state of Israel in 1948. It was followed by the creation of a mutual defense treaty two years later (Fanack.com, 2015). Since then, the League has made efforts to help the Arabs of Palestine secure statehood on terms favourable to them. At the Cairo Summit of 1964, the Arab League initiated the creation of an organization representing the Palestinian people. The first Palestinian National Council convened in East Jerusalem on 29

May 1964. The Palestinian Liberation Organization was founded during this meeting on 2 June 1964. Palestine was shortly admitted in to the Arab League, represented by the PLO. Today, State of Palestine is a full member of the Arab League (Nevo, 1996). At the Beirut Summit on 28 March 2002, the League adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, a Saudi-inspired peace plan for the Arab–Israeli conflict. The initiative offered full normalization of the relations with Israel. In exchange, Israel was required to withdraw from all occupied territories, including the Golan Heights, to recognize Palestinian independence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital, as well as a just solution for the Palestinian refugees. The Peace Initiative was again endorsed at 2007 in the Riyadh Summit. In July 2007, the Arab League sent a mission, consisting of the Jordanian and Egyptian foreign ministers, to Israel to promote the initiative. On 13 June 2010, Amr Mohammed Moussa, Secretary-General of the Arab League, visited the Gaza Strip, the first visit by an official of the Arab League since Hamas' armed takeover in 2007 (Haynes, 2008).

Arab League has continued to face some major obstacles till date as a regional body. Some of these obstacles include the deep economic disparities between oil-rich Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar and poorer nations like Egypt, Yemen and Sudan. Thus, attempts at economic integration has struggled. The Arab League has also continued to struggle to advance human rights and democratic governance in the region, as many of its own member states are authoritarian regimes with poor records on protecting civil liberties (Brownlee, 2012). This is despite the fact that the League's Charter upholds principles of representative rule and personal freedoms. The challenge of youth unemployment is another serious social problem Arab League's member states are faced with. The Arab League faces alarming rates of youth unemployment across many of its member states, exceeding 30% in countries like Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon (Kabbani, 2019).

The Arab League is hampered by a recurring lack of political determination among its members to achieve cooperative solutions, as well as bureaucratic structures that inhibit decisive action (Barnett & Solingen, 2007). There is resistance by member states to cede aspects of national sovereignty to League institutions and collective policymaking. Binding resolutions that carry penalties for non-compliance are rare. Compliance is voluntary, enabling states to ignore League positions contrary to national interests. Decision-making is slowed down by the requirement for unanimity on major resolutions. The League also lacks permanent commissions focusing in depth on economic, social and security affairs. Ministerial meetings happen irregularly, failing to sustain focus on joint projects (Aarts, 1999). The League secretariat lacks executive authority, functioning mostly as an administrative body rather than driving progress on regional integration. Secretary-Generals have had limited impact due to member state constraints (Barnett & Solingen, 2007).

Proposed reforms like establishing an Arab Court of Justice to settle disputes have stalled due to concerns over sovereignty. Critics argue the League needs more assertive institutions backed by member state resources and political commitment if it is to meet 21st century challenges (Aarts, 1999). Overcoming disincentives to cooperation and empowering League institutions require shifts in national political will. Structural reforms could make decision-making more streamlined and enforcement more robust and this can elevate the League's role as an effective regional body.

Despite these challenges, the Arab League has continued to be involved in the Israel-Palestine peace process. The role of the Arab League in the management of the conflict has always been under scrutiny with opinions varying when it comes to evaluating the League's performance. There have been arguments that the Arab League is inherently incapacitated to address regional conflicts because the League lacks credibility or leverage to de-escalate regional conflicts (Barnett & Solingen, 2007). Some scholars are also of the opinion that the Arab region faces serious domestic issues across each member states that these issues are given priorities over the Israel-Palestine conflict (Czelusta, 2021). However, while it is true that many Arab nations are burdened by internal challenges that affect effective regional cooperation, the Arab League has continued to be involved in the Israel-Palestine peace process and has in the past, intervene militarily in the conflict.

Arab League seemingly plays a second fiddle role to countries like the United States in efforts to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, and has failed to exert adequate pressure on the state of Israel. Scholars are divided on the reasons for this, but one issue seemingly under-studied in available literature is the role the internal dynamics of the Arab League play in determining how it responds to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

WEAK INSTITUTIONS AND EFFECTIVE REGIONAL COOPERATION: EXPLAINING THE CAPACITY CHALLENGES OF THE ARAB LEAGUE

Institutions of governance or political institutions are humanly devised rules and procedures (both formal and informal) that enable and constrain political behaviour (Levitsky and Murillo, 2009; Helmke and Levitsky, 2006; O'Donnell, 1996). Institutions are considered strong or weak based stability and enforcement. Thus, strong institutions are stable to the degree that they survive both the passage of time but also evolve as conditions change. Enforcement is the degree to which rules are complied with in practice and in strong institutions, relevant actors (including the governing elites) routinely comply with the rules or face high risk of punishment (Levi, 1997). Although there are hardly any institutions that do not fall short of their intended outcomes, weak institutions have a much larger gap when compared to strong institutions. While strong institutions can cause positive effects in a society, weak institutions undermine the success of many government policies or agenda (Brinks, Levitsky and Murrilo, 2020). Institutional weakness is the gap between the actual and intended effects of an institution (Brinks, Levitsky and Murrilo, 2020). The existence of weak institutions makes the translation of national economic potentials to realistic sustainable development difficult or almost impossible (Graham, 2002; Owogbemi, 2021).

There is a connection between strong institutions and effective regional cooperation. The absence of strong institutions usually makes states give less commitment to regional affairs and prioritize more regime security. Some of the characteristics of states with institutional weakness include loss of control of territory or the sole power of using force therein, crisis of legitimacy and inability to provide basic services to the citizens (Azoro, et al, 2021). Citizens are alienated from governance through undemocratic means like human rights violation, free press repression, electoral fraud and shrinking of the civil society space. Conflicts become problematic when the institutional mechanisms established by the state fail to manage it and prevent an escalation. As argued by Owogbemi (2012), the existence of weak institutions in a state makes the translation of national economic potentials to realistic sustainable development.

This sadly is the reality of many member states of the Arab League. The League is made up of states that are mostly characterized by weak institutions, thus, despite the abundance of wealth, citizens in these states are mostly poor and lack adequate access to basic necessities like healthcare, education, food security, clean water, security, among others. Thus, these states suffer legitimacy crises and their leaders are therefore preoccupied by regime security and not regional affairs.

Indicators from the Arab League shows that majority of member states are characterized by weak institutions and since the Arab 'spring' experience, many member states have prioritized domestic politics over regional affairs that do not threaten them directly. Having a firm grip on power in order to suppress oppositions at home is considered more important by leaders of these Arab League member states than devoting their financial and other strategic resources to a collective struggle at the international level.

This has informed the approach of many member states to the Israel-Palestine conflict. For many member states, the Israel-Palestine conflict is a luxury they cannot commit their limited resources to, hence, not enough political will is shown managing the conflict. The Arab League is hampered by a recurring lack of political determination among its members to achieve cooperative solutions and this impedes the League's ability to address regional issues and crises, particularly the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Arab League member states' armed forces is weak in comparison to Israel's and committing the former's military to a direct confrontation with Israel is also considered an unnecessary luxury by these Arab states. The military would rather be deployed to suppress insurrection or any other form of opposition that threatens their autocratic hold on power.

Like most states with weak institutions, Arab League member states are mostly characterized by autocratic regimes desperately in search of international legitimacy, particularly in the west. Most western countries are pro-Israel and the desire to maintain good relationship with these western nations further makes member states in the Arab League pay only lip-service attention to the Israel-Palestine conflict. It is in this context that we used the weak institutional framework to explain the Arab League's management of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Israel's Improved Relations with many Member States and Arab League's Less Involvement in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Since the end of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, relations between Israel and many Arab states have become less confrontational. Although many Arab League member states are yet to formally recognize Israel as a sovereign state, informal talks and relations continue to take place between Israel and many of these states that such non-recognition is almost a mere formality.

Table 1: Arab League Member States that do not Recognize the State of Israel and/or has no Diplomatic Relations with Israel

S/N	Country	Status of Diplomatic Relations	Recognize Israel as a State
1	Algeria	No relations	No
2	Bahrain	Partial relations	**Yes**
3	Comoros	No relations	**Yes**
4	Djibouti	No relations	**Yes**
5	Egypt	Full diplomatic relations	**Yes**
6	Iraq	No relations	No
7	Jordan	Full diplomatic relations	**Yes**
8	Kuwait	No relations	No
9	Lebanon	No relations	No
10	Libya	No relations	No
11	Mauritania	No relations **(existed between 1999-2009)**	**Yes**
12	Morocco	Full diplomatic relations	**Yes**
13	Oman	No relations **(existed between 1999-2000)**	**Yes**
14	**Palestine**	No relations	No
15	Qatar	No relations **(existed between 1996 and 2009)**	**Yes**
16	Saudi Arabia	No relations	No
17	Somalia	No relations	No
18	Sudan	Full diplomatic relations	**Yes**
19	Syria	No relations	No
20	Tunisia	No relations **(existed between 1996-2020)**	**Yes**
21	UAE	Full diplomatic relations	**Yes**
22	Yemen	No relations	No

Source: CIA World Factbook: Israel in focus, 2023

A look at table 1 shows that 12 out of 22 member states formally recognizes Israel as a sovereign and independent state, representing 54.5% of the total members. These recognitions started after the 1973 War and has also impacted in the League's role in the mediation process with some members strategically taking a neutral position in the conflict. Also, 6 out the 22 member states have either full or partial diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. It must however be noted that four states (Mauritania, Oman, Qatar and Tunisia) had in the past established relations with Israel, particularly trade relations, and these countries and Israel are currently making efforts to amend the relations.

Table 2: Status of Arab League's Observer States relations with Israel

S/N	Country	Status of Diplomatic Relations	Recognize Israel as a State
1	Armenia	Full diplomatic relations	Yes

2	Brazil	Full diplomatic relations	Yes
3	Chad	Full diplomatic relations **(severed between 1972-2016)**	Yes
4	Eritrea	Full diplomatic relations	Yes
5	Greece	Full diplomatic relations	Yes
6	India	Full diplomatic relations	Yes
7	Venezuela	No formal relations since 2009	Yes

Source: CIA World Factbook: Israel in focus, 2023

A look at table 2 also shows that Arab League's seven observer states recognize the status of Israel as a sovereign state. Israel also enjoys full diplomatic relations with all except Venezuela which severed its relations with Israel over the latter's military activities in the wake of the 2008-2009 Israel-Gaza conflict. Also, Chad severed relations with Israel over the Yom Kippur war but de-facto restored the relations in 2016 before formalizing it in 2019.

One of the implications of the improved relation between Israel and many Arab League member states is the latter's tactical withdrawal from several Israel-Palestine peace talks. Since the 1973 War, there have been occasional outbreaks of violence as well as efforts by multiple international actors to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, with the Arab League seemingly playing a limited role in the process.

The United States seems to be the most dominant third-party in the mediation process now. Although the international efforts at peace often include or give responsibilities to actors like the Arab League, European Union (EU) and Russian government, the United States government has since the 1993 Oslo Peace Accord, assumed the role of leading third-party mediation of the conflict between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The United States government has also maintained this status over the years as evident in the efforts of respective administrations to mediate the conflict through peace summits like the Wye River Summit (1998) and Camp David Summit (2000) under President Bill Clinton, the Annapolis process (2008) under President George W Bush, and the Kerry initiative (2013-14) under President Barack Obama (Oji & Adibe, 2019).

Table 3: Key Israel-Palestine Peace Talks/Negotiations after the Yom Kippur War of 1973 not Facilitated by the Arab League

Peace Talk/Negotiation	**Year**	**Key facilitator(s)**
Madrid Conference	1991	United States government (summoned by President George H.W. Bush)
Oslo Accord	1993	United States government (signed in the White House) (President Bill Clinton's administration)
Hebron Agreement	1997	United States government (President Bill Clinton's administration)
Wye Agreement	1998	United States government (President Bill Clinton's administration)
Camp David Summit	2000	United States government (President Bill Clinton's administration)
Annapolis Process	2008	United States government (President George W. Bush's administration)
Kerry Initiatives	2013/2014	United States government (President Barack Obama's administration)

Source: Culled from Oji and Adibe, 2020

INTERNAL CHALLENGES OF MEMBER STATES AND ARAB LEAGUE'S POOR COMMITMENT TO ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT

While the need for the Arab League to defend Palestine still remains a popular public opinion across all Arab countries, in terms of financial commitment to collective security and protecting Palestine however, Arab League's member states are faced with a lot of economic struggles such as poverty, high cost of living, unemployment, among others, that they most times do not have the same kind of luxury as Israel to invest in their respective national military. Member states often prioritize internal security over collective or regional security. Table 4 shows some of the internal conflicts some Arab League member states tackled since 2011 that were/are prioritized over the Israel-Palestine conflict by the affected states.

Table 4: Notable Internal Conflicts in other Arab League States since 2011

Period	Conflict	Arab League member states affected
2011-2012	Arab Uprising (the Arab Spring)	Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Morocco, Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman and Sudan
2013-date	Syrian civil war	Syria
2014-2019	Rise of ISIS	Iraq and Syria
2014-2020	Second Libyan civil war	Libya
2015-date	Yemeni civil war	Yemen, Saudi Arabia (Iran is also a proxy actor in the war)
2020	Lebanese crisis	Lebanon
2018-2019	Sudanese revolution	Sudan
2011-date	Saudi-Arabia-Iran proxy wars	Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen (Iran is also a proxy actor in the wars)

Source: Compiled by the researcher from media reports

Arab League continues to face some major obstacles till date as a regional body. These obstacles impact on their commitment towards funding the League, particularly developing a military force. They include challenges like poor human rights records and democratic governance in the region, youth unemployment and rising poverty. The Arab League faces alarming rates of youth unemployment across many of its member states, exceeding 30% in countries like Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon (Kabbani, 2019) and their support for Palestine in recent times have been nothing short of mere rhetoric.

Arab League in recent times have been consumed with internal friction that it is unable to come up with a unified strategy for addressing the Israel-Palestine conflict. This is worsened by the normalization of relations between some member states and Israel. As a result, Israel continues to bargain from a position of power and the collapse of any peace deal would be to Israel's advantage.

CONCLUSION

Improvement of relations between Israel and some Arab League's member states account for the League's limited involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict mediation process. In our findings, we observed that the nature of involvement of Arab League member state in the Israel-Palestine conflict changed from direct military involvement between 1948 and 1973 to a more neutral cum mediatory approach after the Yom Kippur war of 1973. This improved relations significantly led to limited role played by the League in peace negotiations as western actors like the United States government now play a bigger role in the peace process.

Also, Arab League member's states are mostly characterized by weak institutions and this has implications for how the League operate and interfere in external affairs, including the Israel-Palestine conflict. Weak institutions means that most member states do not prioritize the conflict since they are bedeviled with their own legitimacy and internal security crises.

Arising from these findings, we recommended that:

- The Arab League should make it mandatory that the security of the Palestinian state and Israel's commitment to a two-state solution should be a requirement also for member states to normalize relations with Israel. That way, the League will regain its status as an important mediator in the Israel-Palestine peace process.

- The Arab League should review its Charter and make compliance to resolutions aimed at protecting the interest of Palestine in its conflict with Israel mandatory for all member states. That way, internal differences or improved relations with Israel will become irrelevant on issues that border on the survival of Palestine.

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