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ABSTRACT
Discussion of the contemporary Arab state system overlooks the engagement of the nascent League of Arab States with the debates about world politics and the purposes of the UN system emerging from World War II. The early experience of that body did not articulate a full expression of universalism, and the integrative cooperation of the Arab League was confined to a limited security policy framework. It did not subsequently seek lastingly to influence the nature of those ideas and institutions that would come to shape the United Nations. The Arab League was also never wedded to a Global Southern logic. Yet the UN has seldom been disavowed in the League's diplomatic processes, which have been used by member states tactically as a conduit to maximise regional interpretations of the challenges from global order and as a forum for advancing the sub-region's provincial interests.

In a scene in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*, a leader of the Algerian National Liberation Front (Front de Libération National, FLN) asks a fellow member of his group hiding in the Kasbah (old town) from French colonial authorities whether he understands why the rebels were temporarily suspending their attacks on the French and asking Algerians to hold a nationwide general strike.[1] The man answers that he does indeed, saying: 'To prove it to the United Nations, right?'

Such period when the UN could be looked upon by insurgent armed groups as a strategic option for political leverage, and when the world organisation could summon a ready-made, sympathetic understanding from the average Arab citizen seems long gone today. In the early twenty-first century Western supremacy is dwindling,[2] regional tensions are ever multiplying, and the state system in the Middle East and North Africa is questioned profoundly. Meanwhile such transnational movements as the Islamic State (IS) are bent on reordering regional space along religious dimensions, and post-Arab Spring civil society movements oppose the police regimes that have long dominated the region. Thus, it is important to revisit this key historical moment, which holds revealing aspects of the evolution of the Arab state system, but equally of a fleeting but once shared vision of global politics.

Discussion of the Arab state system often hinges today on the 1916 Sykes–Picot agreement as an illustration of absent Arab agency in the ordering of regional and international affairs.[3] For all its consequential nature, it is inadequate to emphasise the secret agreement about regional spheres of influence between the British and the French (Iraq for the former, Syria for the latter), with Russian support (Foreign Minister Sergei Dmitrievich Sazonov was involved alongside his counterparts Monsieur François Georges-Picot and Sir Mark Sykes, making it really the 'Sykes–Picot–Sazonov' agreement). It hardly captures the full spectrum of postwar colonial divisions of territory in the Arab world in the early-to-mid 20th century. Similarly the dominant narrative on ideology and worldview during these decades often overlooks what emerged, however briefly – namely, a potential engagement of the nascent Arab states through the League of Arab States as the global debate was being born and the United Nations organisation was getting off the ground. Indeed, most of the geopolitical literature on that period focuses primarily on the Palestinian question, on postcolonial struggles in the Levant and North Africa, or on the emergence of oil-rich Arabia. As it were, another key development features in the contemporary history of the Arab state system in-the-making, namely that of the period between World War II in the mid-1940s and the decolonisation moment in the early 1960s. Yet, besides memoirs such as those of former Iraqi prime minister Taha al Hashimi (who briefly served in his country in 1941),[4] only three works are devoted to the question of the Arab League during those years: Muhammad Khalil's *The Arab States and the Arab League*, Ahmed Gomaa's *Foundations of the League of Arab States,* and Yehoshua Porath's *In Search of Arab Unity, 1930–1945*.[5]

As part of a number of Global South perspectives on the nature of the UN project in need of further historical examination, this article argues that the early experience of the League of Arab States did not articulate a full expression of universalism. It was only partially unpacked primarily for domestic reasons, including the lack of a counter-narrative to the state-elite focus on security. At its inception the UN project had been looked upon by the League of Arab States as an ideal that it believed it could mould – or indeed, that it partly owned. The League did not subsequently seek to lastingly influence the nature of those ideas and institutions that would come to shape the new world organisation. However, a small initial push was important and indicative of an ambition to present an alternative political programme rooted in the Arab worldview and its insistence on sovereignty.

In addition, this analysis maintains that, contrary to common perceptions, the UN has seldom been fundamentally disavowed in Arab League diplomatic and multilateral processes. In fact, the UN has, over the past 70 years, often been looked upon by Arab states rather tactically as, on the one hand, a conduit to maximise regional views about the nature of global order and, on the other, a forum for advancing provincial interests. The absence of an internal regional conversation on the role and place of the UN beyond state agencies allowed the statist security paradigm to eschew any wider, depoliticised and deeper engagement on the universal principles within the emerging UN system. The experience of the Arab League came, however, increasingly to feature sub-regional dynamics that gradually weakened the organisation itself and its actions. At the core of the Arab League stand, therefore, two tensions: one between supra-nationality and sovereignty; the other between universality and particularism. Ultimately, however, the Arab League's self-imposed interpretations of regional politics, which excessively highlighted identity,[6] always stood in the way of the conventional narrative about a monochromatic understanding of Third-Worldism and an undifferentiated solidarity in the Global South. Arguing regional exceptionalism could only maximise interests under the logic of bargaining and, paradoxically, acquiescence to the views of international actors.

State building, nationalism and the limits of integration

The League of Arab States (commonly referred to as the Arab League) was founded in Cairo on 22 March 1945 to 'safeguard the independence and sovereignty of member states'.[7] In many ways the birth that year was the coda to the complex and convoluted fall of the Ottoman Empire.[8] The six Arab states then nominally independent – Egypt (1922), Iraq (1932), Lebanon (1943), Saudi Arabia (1932), Syria (1944) and Transjordan (1921, which would become Jordan in 1946) – came together (and were followed shortly thereafter on 5 May by Yemen; North Yemen being independent since 1918). The stated purpose was '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'.[9] Many of the strands of the centuries-long imprint of the Ottoman Empire had combined with the colonial era to delay a genuine period of state building. During the key formative period building up to and following the establishment of the Arab League, the fundamentals of Arab regional politics were set up, and arguably ossified. Ahead of the Cairo Declaration several meetings had taken place in the lead-up. A series of conferences was arranged in Cairo (on 31 July–6 August 1943, 28 August–1 September 1943, 11 October–2 November 1943, 9–13 January 1944, and 6–9 February 1944, under the coordination of Egyptian prime minister Nahas Pasha), giving credence to the view of a thought-out regional process.[10]

During this period two formative logics came together. One the one hand, the formation of the Arab state was itself an 'organic' project establishing a relationship with alternative 'simultaneous' sites of power,[11] notably tribal ones, that were always ready to challenge that new statist order. On the other hand, the intensifying diplomatic exchanges between the new countries – however limited to this nucleus of six countries, in an area that in time would encompass 22 states – were the expression of a reaction to colonial arrangements and subsequent strategic calculations (eg the 1956 Suez crisis), division into political camps (the 'progressivist' countries, such as Iraq and Egypt, vs the 'moderate' ones, such as the Gulf states), and of lasting alliances and counter-alliances (eg Iraqi Ba'ath vs Syrian Ba'ath regimes[12]). Unification and foreign control ran side by side. The scope of the League came then to be defined by the twin conundrum: 'How was the agreed-upon goal of pan-Arab nationalism to be implemented through cooperation amongst the existing sovereign states [and later the others], via partial geographic unification or by more comprehensive unity schemes?...How were Arab political leaders to guard and to enhance their own particular interests both domestically and within the wider Arab setting?'[13]

A third dimension could be added, namely that of an outlook on the world of emerging global, if mostly competing, ideas. By the time a larger, 'Third World' engagement on the universality of the nascent UN order took place, reaching its peak at Bandung in April 1955, the Arab world was involved in this effort, specifically through the development of the League of Arab States and the project behind it. Close examination reveals that an Arab regional dynamic was aimed both at shaping the UN's universalist project and building a regional architecture. Over the next decades, however, the Arab League would gradually exhibit four main dynamics that would come to diminish this initial impetus: sterile regional infighting; bureaucratic inefficiency; side-lining of civil society domestic debates; and a gradual flight from the discourse of universalism to relativism.

In the landscape of international and regional organisations, the Arab League stands apart as regards the nature of its membership, and consequently the project that it pursues. Whereas other organisations have universal state membership (the UN and its specialised agencies), a geographical basis (the African Union [AU], the EU, the Organization of American States [OAS], the Association of Southeast Asian States), or a religious one (the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), the Arab League is based on a shared culture and language. The question of universality was problematic for the region, as universality was viewed as secondary to Arab identity. As the organisation was founded, Ademola Abass summarises: 'Unlike the OAS, the constituent instrument of the Arab League did not expressly declare it to be a regional organisation'. However, the League's status as such had been established by several of its own resolutions and declarations. Furthermore, the General Assembly had made an earlier reference to 'regional organisation in the Middle East such as the Arab League' in 1947. Nonetheless, Israel argued that the objectives of the Arab League were inconsistent with the Purposes and Principles of the UN Charter since, according to Israel, 'the Arab League consisted of people only of a particular race and that its objectives were of an aggressive nature'.[14]

The lasting acuity of the language issue is captured in an episode in 1994 when, at an economic summit meeting in Casablanca, Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres asked the Arab League's secretary-general, Esmet Abdel-Meguid: 'When will we be joining the Arab League?' Abdel-Meguid reportedly responded: 'The day you decide to speak Arabic'.[15]

The Arab League was, then, the expression of an identity. Yet that identity also sought to transcend its cultural and geographic limitations. However reactive it might be, the new discourse sought to anchor itself beyond the confines of colonial norms, including those of the Mandate System.[16] One of the challenges of Arab nationalism was to bridge the notion of non-interference with the one of permeability. Shared norms up to a geographical point, but also shared norms recognising each other's borders. The system that emerged came both from patterned interactions among the new states and from their views about an emerging world order, including the universal United Nations. The League's identity was formed at this time, and the League carried it forward a-historically.

Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Syria took part in the deliberations in San Francisco – as did two other Middle Eastern Muslim countries, Iran and Turkey. However symbolic, that participation was larger than that of Africa (Ethiopia, Liberia and South Africa) and Asia (China, the Philippines and India); but it still represented only one-third of its eventual membership and, in any event, was too small to make a difference.

Egypt presented an argument on responsibilities (duties as corollary to rights) during the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The perspective was essentially about justice and remedying past actions; the country's representative, Osman Obeid, spoke of 'redressment of wrongs'.[17] Another important contribution was made by Charles Malik of Lebanon, who emphasised individual freedom (over the social group) and denounced as 'reprehensible' any 'social pressure on the part of the state'.[18] A full elaboration of 'common' issues was, nonetheless, missing. In this way the UN was arguably looked upon by Arab states as an opportunity to achieve a maximisation of their respective domestic and regional interests rather than as a wider articulation of global norms.

To be sure, the dynamics at play in the Arab region were by no means unique, which was further in evidence when, subsequently, the Palestine and Algeria questions gave urgency to the issue of decolonisation and self-determination. Alongside developments elsewhere

Arab League would rapidly lose interest in a genuine debate of ideas with the international community and fold itself in on regional issues. Logically peace and security would become prioritised as normative issues. In 1950 a Treaty of Joint Defence and Economic Co-operation between the States of the Arab League was developed, and in 1962 a first Arab Coalition operation was launched in Yemen. The question of boundaries and order was addressed through enforcement of a principle of unanimity and non-interference (instead, for instance, of welfare, as touched upon in the debates to which Obeid and Malik contributed), and a focus on close cooperation on military and police affairs. As a result, the Arab League has a long tradition of caving in to *Realpolitik*, which goes back to 1950 – five years after its proclamation – when King Abdullah of then-Transjordan absorbed the Palestinian West Bank into his kingdom.

As noted, the Arab League was also set up in the context of the deteriorating situation in Palestine, as Jewish groups started getting much international support, notably in the UK and the USA, beyond the local work of the Jewish Agency, the organisation designated in 1929 that was in the League of Nations mandate and responsible for the oversight of immigration into Palestine of the Jewish diaspora. Over the years the conflict with Israel cemented this logic even more firmly. After the June 1967 war, the League issued the Khartoum Declaration of the 'Three Nos': No to peace with Israel, no to the recognition of Israel, and no to negotiations with Israel. A political and economic boycott of Israel followed. Yet the question of engagement with Israel would remain undecided. In 1979 Egypt would sign a peace treaty with Israel – leading to the suspension of its membership in the Arab League and the relocation of the organisation's headquarters to Tunis until 1990. The Palestinian Authority (1993) and Jordan (1994) would later follow suit. In 1995 Mauritania established diplomatic relations with Israel and, in 1996, Qatar and Israel established trade relations – both processes were suspended in 2009 following the Israeli attack on Gaza. More recently a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel has gained momentum in the Arab world and beyond.[24]

Designed this way, the integrative cooperation of the Arab League was confined to the limited security policy framework, with minimum agreements as its outcome. Such 'under-integration' spelled poor mediation and power of implementation. It can be maintained that

> the decision-making process in the League lacks efficient regional cooperation, with member states' common interests as the only stimulator of integration…As a concrete realisation of regionalism, the integration process must be at the expense of part of sovereignty. [Yet] the Arab League lacks an efficient decision-making institution and supra-national policy-implementing mechanism.[25]

From the mid-1940s, to the mid-1960s, the early UN witnessed a moment that arguably catalysed the resolution of the intense Arab debate on sovereignty along more international lines. The tension between pan-Arab nationalism and sovereignty in the region was at its peak. Ultimately, however, 'the emergence of regional order in the Arab world was a consequence of the consolidation of state sovereignty and a changed meaning of Arab nationalism'. Rather than an emphasis on societal expectations of nationhood, it shifted towards 'the establishment of relatively stable expectations and shared norms to govern inter-Arab relations'.[26] Unevenly matching ideational and material aspects, the League opted for security, thus strengthening the bargaining power of its member states but to the detriment of societal dynamics and international engagement. In the event, 'the institutionalisation of sovereignty and the changed meaning of Arab nationalism encouraged Arab leaders to act

more consistently with the behavioural expectations associated with sovereignty, which in turn increased regional order'.[27] This, however, ended up producing self-weakening sub-regionalist patterns within the organisation.

Sub-regionalism, global order and Arab conflicts

While the League of Arab States had minimally engaged in the debate of ideas at the UN,[28] opting swiftly to focus on its neighbourhood issues, the organisation has developed stronger ties with the world body on security matters. This followed naturally from the UN's Chapter VIII of enforcement through regional organisations and the League's initial focus on these questions. Tracing an arc from the 1948 Arab–Israeli conflict by way of the 1956, 1967 and 1973 wars, as well the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon, to the 1990 Gulf war to the 2011 Libyan and Syrian crises, the UN was systematically present, with a continued engagement with the Arab League (and at times joint missions, as was the case in Syria).

Cooperation reached its apex at three important moments: the occasion of the 1990–91 Gulf war; the 2011 intervention in Libya; and the onset of the civil war in Syria in 2011. Following the August 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Arab League – which was initially divided in its reaction to this event – and the UN joined efforts to adopt an economic embargo against Baghdad, followed by a military operation led by the USA. Also of consequence were several missions throughout the 1990s to keep the country under economic and political containment, notably through the Oil-for-Food Programme and the missions of the UN Special Commission on the Elimination of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Similarly endorsing a resolution initially adopted by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Arab League took the matter of Libya to the UN Security Council, which led to Resolutions 1970 and 1973 that authorised intervention against the Muammar Qaddafi regime and a military operation led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Finally, in the wake of the uprising against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in March 2011, the Arab League led a joint observer mission with the UN to monitor the situation in Syria in late 2012 and early 2013.

This association was characterised by a partnership focused on military operations and did not necessarily achieve successful results. Moreover, the cooperation hid the fact that the Arab League itself was, throughout, playing catch-up to sub-regional developments. In addition, the experience confirms the argument that, in spite of the claim that regional organisations have to play an important role in conflict resolution, the record of a number of regional bodies is often not particularly satisfactory.[29] As seen earlier, part of this can be traced to the fact that the Arab League has been 'a conservative stronghold advocating the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states…[and] it did not launch any significant policy within the scope of member-controlled areas'.[30]

In 1976 the Arab League had set up an Arab Deterrent Force (ADF) with a mandate to help end the strife in Lebanon;[31] and in 1989 the Taif Agreement, which ended the Lebanese civil war, was negotiated diplomatically by Saudi Arabia and Syria. The 1990–91 Gulf war lastingly reoriented the scene and introduced the militarisation of the League's approach to diplomacy. The combination of Iraq's extraordinary invasion and Saudi Arabia's equally surprising call for US troops set the stage for a historical shift. 'Saddam's act, unique in the annals of modern Arab history, prompted a similarly unprecedented abandonment of long-held norms and taboos by his Arab neighbours. Saudi Arabia dropped its traditional "over the horizon" policy

of opposing a US military presence on its soil, even at the risk of creating an affront to Muslim sensibilities.[32] Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi later on revealed the growing tension within the Arab League. However extreme (the commonalities are multiple), his 'we share nothing beyond these walls…we are enemies of one another' words at the 2008 summit gave form to the unspoken violence that had built up within Arab diplomatic circles.

In institutionally weakening itself, the League has paradoxically set itself up for a proliferation of parallel and sub-regional fora, which have rendered conflict resolution even more arduous.[33] At different times and in changing configurations, specific political camps and alliances of countries pursued their political objectives away from the League and at its expense. Generally the Gulf states, initially led by Saudi Arabia and joined later on by the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in parallel diplomacy, were the dominant actors. Morocco and Jordan (two monarchies) often associated themselves with these efforts. Egypt was always key, notably because of the League's location in Cairo and the individual activism of some Egyptian secretaries-general, in particular Amr Moussa. Marco Pinfari identifies such chaotic 'forum shopping' logic:

> One of the most visible countermeasures that have been taken to compensate for the apparent weakness of regional organisations in conflict resolution, especially in the Mediterranean basin, the Middle East and Africa, has been the creation of a number of sub-regional bodies and inter-organisational forums, which in turn resulted in a substantial increase in the number of actors involved in conflict resolution activities.[34]

Conflicts such as those between Egypt and Libya in 1977, Sudan throughout the 1980s–2000s, the 1990–91 Gulf crisis, or more recently the Syrian civil war or the Libyan one did indeed lead to such a confused picture and, often, contradictory processes.

Some cooperation also took place with the Organisation of African Unity and later the AU, with a first summit held in March 1977 in Cairo and a second in October 2010 in Sirte, Libya. Arab states were not, however, committed to communal cooperation with Africa and the cooperation was *de facto* institutionalised in a hierarchy, with latter-day Arab regimes often looking down upon their African counterparts. Indeed, Arab–African cooperation, which in the 1970s had set a precedent in South–South collaboration, had by the 1990s developed into a sort of Third World variety of the North–South divide.[35] The short-lived revival in the twenty-first century owed much to Qaddafi's own political goals, his financial influence on the AU and to the international dynamic of cooperation with other international organisations, notably the EU.

The Arab League's process was less military and more diplomatic in this new phase, but it still concerned its arch-enemy. In 2002 it adopted an Arab Peace Initiative Plan, which called for an Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines and the establishment of a Palestinian state in return for normal diplomatic relations, including Israel's right to exist. Besides suggesting a solution to Israel's most fundamental problem – the occupation and the deterioration of its international standing – the initiative afforded the potential both to improve Israel's security situation and to meaningfully strengthen its economy.[36] The plan has, however, generally been ignored by both Israel and the international community.

In recent years pressure came upon the Arab League sideways. After 11 September 2001, debate picked up on the need for reform in the region (from within or from without). In parallel, domestic oppositions had been pushing for reforms for several years. Finally, the *Arab Human Development Report* (2002–09) argued that change was needed to address three deficits in the region: freedom, women's empowerment and knowledge.[37] In response, the

Arab League developed a number of initiatives to advance the rule of law. An Independent Human Rights Committee was established following the Arab Charter on Human Rights in 2008, when a Group of Experts on Combating Terrorism was set up. The efforts remained superficial, and the Arab League did not engage in the debate about political liberalisation and democratisation that raged on in the Arab world from 2011 to 2013. Indeed, as Hesham Youssef notes:

> rule of law reform in the Arab world has suffered from a notable lack of strategy…Programmes have typically focused on institutional objectives and formal legal structures, without a nuanced understanding of the political and economic dynamics that prevented the creation of such structures in the first place, or of the reality of how disputes were settled, which often relied on informal mechanisms.[38]

The post-Arab Spring period saw a renewal of activism on the part of the Arab League.[39] Undeniably, the League – specifically Secretary-general Amr Moussa[40] – saw an opportunity to engineer change within the organisation. How much was that Egyptian assertiveness, and how much was it an evolution of the organisation? However, to move overnight beyond being a mere club of presidents was no easy task. The attempted reinvention in the middle of regional upheaval came at a price:

> While the situation in several Arab countries has been alarming and human rights were gravely violated for decades prior to the revolutions, the Arab League never took firm, serious steps in these situations to ensure respect for and protection for human rights. In fact, the position of the League on human rights violations leading up to and during the Arab Spring continued to be driven not by a coherent and systematic human rights policy but by political considerations.[41]

Generally derided for its inefficiency and lack of action,[42] the League regarded the Arab Spring as an opportunity to rehabilitate itself in the eyes both of the Arab citizenry and of the global community.[43] This played out on three fronts: the 2012 Palestinian bid for state-hood before the UN, the Libyan crisis and the Syrian one. Yet, upon closer examination, again each of the League's efforts was led more by specific actors within the membership than by the Arab League itself. The Palestinian question was championed by Saudi Arabia, which took the matter to the UN General Assembly. The Libyan matter was dealt with by the GCC. The Syrian question was a consensual reaction to the UN's own efforts. Whereas in earlier operations the Arab League had acted cautiously,[44] accepting infringement on the sovereignty of its members (Libya and Syria) was a deepening of the trend initiated in 1990 with Iraq. In February 2011 the Arab League suspended Libya's right to participate in its bodies and meetings in protest against the violence used by Qaddafi on civilians. Witnessing similar upheaval in Bahrain, the Arab League issued no condemnation. It also took a back seat in both the UN and the GCC on the matter of the Yemen crisis in 2011–12. In April 2012 it expressed its support for the GCC initiative for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The handling of the Syrian crisis, starting in March 2011, further revealed a more dynamic and engaged organisation, which collaborated with the UN on a dual Arab League–United Nations mission. However, instead of working to find a solution between the Syrian parties, the League suspended the government's participation in its meetings in November 2011.[45] In July 2012 it sponsored a conference of the Syrian opposition and the following month decided to provide support to the Syrian people to defend themselves. In March 2013 it invited the leader of the Syrian opposition, the Syrian National Council (subsequently 'Coalition', or SNC), Moaz al Khatib, to occupy the seat behind the Syrian flag at the Arab League's meeting in Doha. As Abdel Bari Atwan notes, 'the Arab League decided to back

regime change by force of arms early on, and approved the provision of modern weapons to the opposition to accelerate the process. This directly contributed to the militarisation of the struggle, and paved the way for the entry of Jihadist groups to the battlefield.'[46] In April 2014 Lakhdar Brahimi, who in August 2012 had replaced Kofi Annan as Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the League of Arab States to Syria, was asked to close the Arab League component of his mission and function solely in his UN capacity. He resigned a month later, as had his predecessor.

In addition to the difficulties of the Syrian crisis and the paralysing great-power game between the USA and Russia, a contradiction was increasingly perceptible: the ideational background of the Arab League's policy towards Syria was based on universal values ignored by leading Arab actors in their domestic politics.[47] The Syrian crisis came rapidly to embody too many contradictions and to represent too many threats for the member states. In acting in the name of human rights, the rule of law and respect for the Syrian people's right to choose their leader, member states embarked on a path that, for most of them, would easily point to the violations of these very values in their own respective domestic policies. Underneath the professed rule-of-law reasons lay, for many of the regimes embattled with the socio-political storm unleashed by the Arab Spring, a much more geostrategic set of objectives that were in effect the fundamental drivers for these states.

Conclusion

The near-simultaneous births of the UN and the League of Arab States could have given hope that they would provide ground for an understanding that the new world organisation could be a vector for the merging of worldviews rather than solely, though importantly, for the advancement of Arab political emancipation. The Algerian decolonisation case and the hopes placed in its presentation to the UN in the late 1950s exemplifies such a founding moment, however much disappointment followed as, caving in to French pressure, the world body failed to engage the matter. Choosing to switch rapidly to a regional security logic, the Arab League has had a poor track record of efficiency, unity and governance. In many ways it has mirrored the larger contemporary dystrophies of the Arab world. Few in the region came to pin serious hopes on its work. Above all, it was looked upon as an arena where political weight was gauged among the Arab states and *Realpolitik* dominated, with Arab citizenry and civil society having little say.

In spite of its sustained engagement with the UN on peace and security operations, the Arab League has looked upon regional issues – armed conflicts primarily but not exclusively, because human rights and religion also figure in League deliberations – as a jealously guarded sphere. This approach translated into an emerging process of sub-regionalism whereby several centres of power, notably the GCC or such key countries as Saudi Arabia, led more decisively on crisis management than did the League itself.

Contrary to common perception, the Arab League was arguably never really wedded to a Global Southern logic. It was and has remained distinctly conservative and, over time, paradoxically closer to the very agendas of the Western great powers that it publicly denounced. Ideological disagreements were only expressed in specific moments and often with a view primarily to protecting a regime's interests (eg on questions of human rights or democracy). Concessions on human rights came late and reluctantly as reaction to advocacy

work by Arab civil society – also embodied in the UN Development Programme-sponsored *Arab Development Report*.

The initial Arab League nucleus was from the Mashreq and was historically close to Western countries that saw merit in such a forum in the aftermath of the Mandate system – as early as 1941 Anthony Eden expressed support for 'Arab unity' in his speech on 29 May at Mansion House.[48] Progressivist positions would materialise much later in the 1970s and find more leadership in the Maghreb (Houari Boumédiene's Algeria, Hassan II's Morocco and Habib Bourguiba's Tunisia). Arguably, too, there was no common vision besides independence and overarching Arab nationalism. Socialist ideas would come to be prevalent in Egypt and Algeria, and capitalist ones in the Gulf. The monarchies-vs-republics divide would come to dominate, with other cross-currents of bilateral and trilateral interests and animosities setting the stage for institutionalised sub-regionalism in the 1990s and beyond, with 15 of the 22 members of the Arab League members of a sub-regional Arab organisation. The recent, post-Arab Spring adoption of universal values is misleading. Whereas the early moment was genuinely pursuing their advancement, the latest push is marred by double-standards and inconsistencies and, paradoxically, driven by an attempt to line up with external policy agendas. In many ways the actions that the League undertook – expulsion of Syria and the no-fly zone over Libya – were merely replaying those that it had long criticised.

Writing in 1993 Bruce Maddy-Weitzman divided the historical evolution of inter-Arab relations into four overlapping yet distinct periods since the establishment of the League in 1945: a 'dynastic' phase (1945–54); the Nasser interlude (1954–70); the Sadat and Saudi era (1970–79); and the fragmentation era (1979–89).[49] To these, can be added a fifth phase: of challenge from non-state actors and the pursuit of renewed state-building (2000s–2010s).

In the face of this development, the Arab League moved further into the field of securitisation. In 2015 it announced the establishment of a joint military force comprising some 40,000 troops. Allegedly developed in response to unprecedented threats and unrest in the region – the force was also put together to face Iran[50] –it was driven more by a security reordering of the region, however, and by the rise of a second wave of neo-authoritarianism. Here, too, the logic was reactive, as a reinvigorated, 'super-GCC' could only mean that the Arab League would have to re-examine its own approach. The pursuit of a joint security force is, nonetheless, particularly problematic, given the League's history and the disposition of its members. As Martin Beck notes:

> the building of joint forces requires a high degree of mutual trust, which is difficult to achieve amongst authoritarian regimes. Related to this is the issue that an Arab military force will turn out to be a powerful instrument only if it is embedded in an institutionalised system of collective security, which requires sophisticated institutional design, including the readiness of member states to waive some rights of sovereignty.[51]

In the final analysis the birth of the Arab League was more than anything else inherently linked to the colonial setting and the yearning for an integrated Arab polity, as well as the decline of the British and French empires along with the Cold War. Yet the experience of the Arab League is an important reminder of how much potential for multilateralism existed in the early days of the UN. As Dan Plesch and Thomas G. Weiss have noted, 'both the substance of wartime efforts and their geographical reach go far beyond the simple morality tale of a military triumph, usually told as an American or Anglo-American story that has arguably

become the defining experience of the contemporary world order'.[52] The subsequent management of that ideal by the League of Arab States has, so far, kept that promise of an integrated multilateralism elusive in an increasingly polarised world and region.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

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Notes

1. On this episode, which takes place in March 1957, and the events around the 'battle of Algiers' more generally, see Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*.
2. See Weber and Jentleson, *The End of Arrogance.*
3. The agreement did not concern the situation in the Maghreb, which was not covered by the Mandate System. However, the issues of political control and colonial dispossession applied in the same vein, as they did to the other parts of the Arab world, namely the Nile Valley and the Gulf.
4. Hashimi, *Mudhakirat Taha al Hashami.*
5. Khalil, *The Arab States*; Gomaa, *Foundations*; and Porath, *In Search of Arab Unity*.
6. See Gumbo, "The Hobbesian Nightmare," 1.
7. Toffolo, *The Arab League.*
8. See Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*.
9. *Pact of the League of Arab States*, Article Two, March 22, 1945.
10. Ireland, "The Pact of the League of Arab States," 798.
11. See Bassam Tibi's discussion of this aspect. Tibi, "The Simultaneity of the Unsimultaneous," 127–152.
12. See Kienle, *Ba'th vs. Ba'th*.
13. Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallisation of the Arab State System*, 3.
14. Abass, *Regional Organisations*, 41.
15. Sid'Ahmed, "When Israelis speak Arabic," 8. On this issue Albert Hourani opened his classic work *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* thus: 'More conscious of their language than any people in the world, seeing it not only as the greatest of their arts but also as their common good, most Arabs, if asked to define what they meant by "the Arab nation", would begin by saying that it included all those who speak the Arabic language. But this would only be the first step […] A full definition would include reference to a *historic* process.' Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, (emphasis added).
16. On the imprint of the latter, see Louis, "The Era of the Mandates System," 201–213.
17. Russel, *A History of the United Nations Charter*, 26.
18. Best et al., *International History of the Twentieth Century*, 206–207.
19. Bhagavan, "Toward Universal Relief and Rehabilitation," 131–132.

20. Galal and Hoekman, *Arab Economic Integration*, 1.
21. On this, see Dawn, "The Formation of Pan-Arab Ideology." Paradoxically there is an important strand of Arab nationalism (running from Rifaa al Tahtawi to Sati al Husri by way of Abderrahman al Kawakibi) that was influenced by European ideas of nationalism, in particular Johann Fichte's 1808 "Address to the German Nation" and Giuseppe Mazzini's Italian *Risorgimento* in the 1830s.
22. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War*.
23. Khadduri, "The Arab League," 756.
24. See Weiss, *Arab League Boycott of Israel*.
25. Chen and Zhao, "The Arab League's Decision-making System," 62, 66.
26. Barnett, "Sovereignty, Nationalism and Regional Order," 480, 481. Elsewhere Barnett highlighted the institution-building potential of pan-Arabism – albeit a weak one. Barnett, "Institutions, Roles and Disorder."
27. Barnett, "Sovereignty, Nationalism and Regional Order," 505.
28. For instance, the Arab Human Rights Charter was late (it was adopted in 2004), derivative (inspired largely by the 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights) and hesitant (the revised 2008 version was ratified by only 11 of the 22 members of the League).
29. Pinfari, "Interregionalism and Multiparty Mediation," 83.
30. Beck, *The Arab League*, 2.
31. See Pogany, *The Arab League*.
32. Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallisation of the Arab State System*, ix.
33. The increasing importance of sub-regional identities was illustrated by the creation of several parallel entities in the 1980s. The six-member GCC was founded in 1981; the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) was launched in 1987, regrouping Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia; and a short-lived Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) was set up in 1989, composed of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and North Yemen.
34. Pinfari, "Interregionalism and Multiparty Mediation," 84.
35. Mattes, "Aftermath of the Sirte Summit," 7. On the first phase of the relationship, see Zarour, *La Coopération Arabo-Africaine*.
36. Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy, *The Arab Peace Initiative*.
37. UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report*, 2002 to 2009, /www.arab-hdr.org/.
38. Youssef, "The Arab League and the Rule of Law," 56.
39. See Hatinger, *The League of Arab States*.
40. In July 2011 another Egyptian former foreign minister, Nabil al Arabi, replaced Amr Moussa, who had been at the helm of the league since June 2001.
41. Rishmawi, *The League of Arab States*, 55.
42. For a critical insider account, see Raiss, *Jama'at al Doual al 'Arabiya*.
43. See Sussman, "After Mideast Uprisings."
44. Pogany, "The Arab League."
45. As noted, the only other country that had ever been suspended was Egypt, following its peace treaty with Israel in 1978.
46. Atwan, *The Islamic State*, 96.
47. Beck, *The Arab League*, 2.
48. Hill, *Cabinet Decisions on Foreign Policy*, 258–262. Eden declared: 'It seems to me both natural and right that the cultural and economic ties between the Arab countries, yes and the political ties too, should be strengthened. His Majesty's Government for their part will give their full support to any scheme that commands general approval.'
49. Maddy-Weitzman, *The Crystallisation of the Arab State System*, 1.
50. This is what Stavridis argues. See his "The Arab NATO."
51. Beck, "Upgrading the Arab League." See also Bröning, "The All-Arab Army?"; and Gaub, *An Arab Army*.
52. Plesch and Weiss, "Conclusion," 202.

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