

Historical Background

After World War II, two issues dominated the popular trend in Arab countries:

One. The notion of *Arab unity*, recalling the first pan-Arab awakening the roots of which went back to the establishment of secret societies under the Ottomans, such as Al Ahad (1909) and the Arab Fatat (1913), and the Arab revolt of 1916.

Two. *The Palestine Question*, recalling the Palestinian revolts and uprising during the British Mandate with its peak in the Great Revolt of 1936 that ended with St. James' Conference in London and the British White Paper of 1939.

In the early 1940s, Arab capitals witnessed a series of political consultations, followed by public statements, concerning Arab unity on the one hand and the Palestine Question on the other. Against this background, British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden declared the British government's support for the Arab countries' desire for unity and for their rights to strengthen their cultural, economic and political ties. Eden stressed that his government intended to support any agreement the Arabs would reach in this regard.

The reaction of the Arab capitals was mixed: the Jordanians welcomed the British position as it supported Prince Abdallah's plans for the unity of Greater Syria; the Saudis were doubtful and cautious; the Yemenis ignored it; Iraq, Syria and Lebanon were not enthusiastic about it; and Egypt called for an Egyptian-Sudanese unity (unity of the Nile Valley).

Two Arab prime ministers, Nuri Sa'id of Iraq and Mustafa Nahhas Pasha of Egypt, though for different reasons, made intensive efforts to draft the framework for a unity plan on which Arab governments would agree. Both of them were in direct contact with London.

Nuri Sa'id's ambition was driven by his vision of a united fertile crescent as outlined in his Blue Book of 1943. He discussed his ideas with British government officials and introduced the term "Arab League", which then related to the unity of Iraq with Greater Syria, while it left the door open for any other Arab country that wished to join. Sa'id drafted a specific plan, that foresaw the formation of a permanent council of the League to be responsible for the spheres of defence, foreign policy, finance, currency, taxation, and transportation, as well as for the protection of minorities. He also recommended that if Syria and Lebanon were reluctant to join such a body they should be forced to become members.

Egypt's Mustafa Nahhas Pasha invited Nuri Sa'id to Cairo in July 1943 to officially discuss the issue of Arab unity, on the need of which they both agree in principle. However, they differed in their priorities and on leadership issues. While Nuri Sa'id opted for a Syrian-Iraqi unity first, Nahhas Pasha wanted a role for Egypt in any form of a unity. In September 1943, Nahhas Pasha also invited Taufiq Abu Al-Huda, Prime Minister of Jordan, and discussed with him the possibilities of an immediate unity between Syria and Jordan, with the option to invite, at a later stage, Lebanon and Palestine to join. As political system for such a future unity a monarchy was envisioned. In October 1943, Sa'adallah Al-Jabari, Prime Minister of Syria, followed an invitation by Nahhas Pasha for the same reason, but Damascus' insisted on a republican system rather than a monarchy.

The Saudis informed Nahhas Pasha about their objection to the proposed unity and expressed their worries about the Hashemite plans and intentions. They clearly limited their support to economic cooperation. In January 1944, the Lebanese

Bishara Khoury notified Nahhas Pasha that they preferred independence and secure borders for all Arab countries.

The Egyptian-Iraqi attempts to create a unity plan did not succeed but led to a political storm in most Arab countries. It became clear that there was a dire need to deliver something in order to meet the peoples' expectations and aspirations. Having realized this, Egypt called for an Arab conference which was held in Alexandria in October 1944. The conference's outcomes was the *Alexandria Protocol* that established the Arab League in March 1945.

According to Arab historians, the Arab League was not meant as a federal unity but as an institution which would bring independent states together as a base to share common interests and possibly agree on common action, while recognizing their independence and guaranteeing their sovereignty. It is worthwhile mentioning that throughout all political consultation that took place between Nahhas Pasha and Nuri Sa'id, the Palestine Question was a core issue on which an Arab consensus was easy to reach. The Palestine Question was a precedent on which Arab leaders experienced for the first time, in the London conference of 1939, how to commonly deal with a major cause. The London conference exposed their differences in terms of ambitions and interests, and laid open how much input they each could and were ready to designate in support of the Palestinians.

The Alexandria Conference of 1944 was attended by a Palestinian scholar, Musa Al-Alami, who was chosen as a representative of all Palestinian parties since the Arab leaders did not welcome the participation of the Grand Mufti of Palestine (Haj Amin Al-Hussein). Al-Alami worked closely with the Egyptians and the Iraqis, succeeded in easing the British government's initial reservation about his participation, and delivered his speech.

Some historians refer to the historical background of the establishment of the Arab League as a British initiative; others tend to give the credits to Nahhas Pasha of Egypt while Nuri Sa'id is least mentioned as the Iraqis were too anxious to have their own vision for Arab unity - basically confined to the fertile crescent - realized. I personally can come to the conclusion that because of the public awareness and the common call for Arab unity as well as for the defence of Palestine, all parties concerned had their input into what eventually led to the establishment of the Arab League.

The Alexandria Protocol had a special emphasis on Palestine, stating that it is a major component of the Arab entity, that Arab rights should be maintained and defended, and that no peace or stability could prevail as long as Palestine was threatened.

The special resolution on Palestine in these protocols called for an immediate halt of Jewish immigration to Palestine and the preservation of Arab land. Independence of Palestine was considered a solid Arab right, and the resolution called for the establishment of an "Arab Fund" the means of which would be used to save Arab lands in Palestine.

The Arab League: Challenges and Achievements:

With the UN Partition Plan for Palestine of 1947, the Arab League held a series of meetings concluding in the decision to invite Arab armies to enter Palestine in order to defend its territory and people. This led to the first Arab-Jewish war of 1948, as a result of which Palestine became divided: a major part became Israel, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, was under Jordanian control, while the Gaza Strip was ruled by Egypt.

The Arab League's Political Committee supported the Palestinians' decision to establish a government in Gaza and welcomed its representative to attend officially

all meetings of the League. At the same time, Committee expressed its reservation about Jordan's plan to annex or forcibly unite with the West Bank, stressing that Jordanian rule was only temporarily, i.e., pending on the Palestinians' exercise of their rights to self-determination.

In the 1960, another issue the Arab League dealt with was the deterioration of Iraqi-Kuwaiti relations due to the formers territorial claims. The Arab League defended Kuwait and succeeded in forcing Iraq (Abdel Karim Qassem) to stop all plans of annexing or invading Kuwait. However, regarding the border dispute between Yemen and Saudi-Arabia the Arab League failed in achieivng a settlement. At the time, Egypt led the Arab League and had no problem to interfere with regard to the first issue; concerning the second issue, however, Egypt was constrained by the fact that its own military forces were in Yemen to support the Yemeni revolt and to fight along the new Republican regime against Saudi interferences. These two examples show that in order to understand and judge the achievements and failures of the Arab League, one should read carefully into inter-Arab politics and disputes.

The first Arab League summit in Cairo in 1964 was called by President Gamal Abdul Nasser of Egypt. The two challenges facing the Arab world at that time were the Israeli intention to divert the flow of the Jordan River, and the fate of the Palestinians. During the deliberations, the Arab League decided to establish a military umbrella, headed by an Egyptian general (Ali Ali Amr), with the task to reorganize and enforce the Arab armies to defend Arab territories and to counter Israeli threats. Regarding the Palestine Question, the Arab League decided to establish the Palestinian Liberation organization (PLO), then headed by Ahmad Shuqeiri, with the goal to mobilize and unite Palestinians in their struggle for their lands and rights.

Following the 1967 June War, Egypt and Jordan caused a division in the Arab League by accepting UN Resolution 242, which was strongly rejected by Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the PLO. It took these countries more than a decade to realize the importance of utilizing UN resolutions in order to confront Israeli deceptions. In 1969, the Arab League held its famous summit in Khartoum where the Arab consensus was not to accept the defeat of the 1967 June war. The resolution passed at the summit stated the participants agreement

“to unite their political efforts at the international and diplomatic level to eliminate the effects of the aggression and to ensure the withdrawal of the aggressive Israeli forces from the Arab lands which have been occupied since the aggression of June 5. This will be done within the framework of the main principles by which the Arab States abide, namely, no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it, and insistence on the rights of the Palestinian people in their own country.”

At the Rabat Summit in 1974, despite Jordan's refusal, the PLO was recognized by the Arab League as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Also during the 1970s, inspired by Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Arab League succeeded in putting an end to the bloody military confrontation between the PLO and the Jordanians, and, at a later stage, helped achieving a series of agreements between the PLO and Lebanon. This time, it was Saudi Arabia which took the deed to invite all parties involved in the Lebanese civil war to Taif in 1975 and to conclude an agreement.

A major crisis within the Arab League occurred when Egypt went alone and signed a separate peace treaty with Israel in Camp David in 1979. As a consequence, the Arab League summit in Baghdad decided to suspend Egypt's membership and to move their headquarters from Egypt to Tunisia. It was the first time that a non-Egyptian was appointed as the General Secretary of the League: Shazili Qulaibi of Tunisia succeeded former Egyptian Foreign Minister Mahmoud Riad (whose predecessors were Mahmoud Fawzi and Abdul Rahman Azzam, both also former Egyptian foreign ministers).

In the 1980s, especially with regard to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the forced departure of the PLO, seeking exile in Tunisia, no Arab country nor the Arab League interfered. At the most, they released political statements in solidarity with the PLO and the Lebanese people but they did nothing to defend Lebanese territory or preserve its unity.

In February 1985, the PLO and Jordan signed the famous accord that stated their intention to work together towards the establishment of a Palestinian-Jordanian confederation. The Arab reaction ranged between the Syrian rejection, Saudi Arabia's reservation, and no comments on the part of the others.

In November 1987, an Arab League summit was held in Amman. It called for economic cooperation, reconciliation between Iraq and Syria, inviting Egypt to return to the League, and, for the first time and unexpectedly, totally ignored the PLO and the Palestinian agenda.

A month later, however, with the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada in December 1987, all Arab countries with no exception expressed their strong support for and solidarity with the Palestinian cause. In the following year, Arab leaders encouraged Jordan to declare its disengagement from the West Bank. However, the Arab countries' position on the peace initiatives of the PLO and their interest to enter political negotiations with Israel was rather disapproving.

Another major crisis of the Arab League emerged during the Gulf crisis in 1990. The division among Arab countries was obvious: while some condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and joined the foreign allied forces to stop the Iraqi aggression, others called for the formation of a united Arab force to maintain security and stability and to preserve the borders of all countries in the region. The Arab League decided to condemn the invasion and called on Iraq to withdraw its army instantly. At a later stage, the weight of the Arab League's position was rather marginalized as it became obvious that each Arab country would eventually decide alone and in accordance with its interests on what stand to take viv-a-vis the Iraqi-Kuwaiti dispute as well as the level of normalization with Israeli some time later following the commencement of the Madrid peace conference.

The role of the Arab League was also less effective when the US invited various Arab states to participate in the Madrid Middle East Peace Conference, based on negotiations (on both bilateral and multilateral tracks) and on the 'land-for-peace'-formula. The Arab League was not invited, not even as an observer.

Between 1990 and 1995, the Arab League had clearly a side role but it re-emerged to the foreground and is today more viable as it was half a century ago. With the weak process of political negotiations between Israel, Palestinians and other regional countries, the Arab League turned to be a necessary tool to maintain the linguistic and cultural links, to preserve the common interests of its member states, and to cope with the changes in the international arena and their repercussions on the Arab world. Today, Arab leaders are talking about the need to strengthen the Arab economy and develop a common market, as well as to reinforce inter-Arab peace, to safeguard Arab interests, and to fight security and "terror" threats. Today, the Arab League is led by another distinguished Egyptian foreign minister, Esmat Abdel Majid, whose task, among others, is to lead the Arab League into the 21st Century.