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Arab League's Syrian Policy

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ABSTRACT

Suspension of Syria's Arab League membership in November 2011 could be characterized as a turning point in Arab League's 66-year old history. By condemning the Syrian and Libyan regimes for disproportionate use of violence against their own people, the Arab League has somewhat found rightful the demand of Arab people. The League has signaled with these decisions that it would move away from ideas of Arab nationalism and Arab unity in pursuit of further integration with the international system.

On the other hand, the authoritarian state systems of most of the member states of the League make it difficult to regard Arab League decisions as steps supporting democracy. The League's "democratic stance" is an outcome of the pressure of revolutions as much as of harmony of interests among the member states. Even though strengthening democracy in the region seems like an unrealistic desire of member states, these decisions push each member towards thinking about change and thus pave the way for democratic reform process.

The study at hand consists of two parts. The first part addresses the League's policy proposals, decisions, and reactions regarding the Syrian crisis and concentrates on what these all policy measures mean for the League as a regional organization. The second part examines regional dynamics that play a crucial role in the current crisis by looking at different positions of regional and global actors on the Syrian crisis.



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION | 3

A) ARAB LEAGUE IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS | 6

Arab League suspends Syria's Arab League membership | 6

Arab League Observer Mission | 8

Arab League Peace Plan and bringing the issue to the UN | 11

B) THE ARAB LEAGUE'S SYRIAN POLICY AND ITS BACKGROUND | 14

CONCLUSION | 17

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ARAB LEAGUE'S SYRIAN POLICY

Müjge Küçükkeleş*

INTRODUCTION

Suspension of Syria's Arab League membership in November 2011 could be characterised as a turning point in Arab League's 66-year old history. Since its establishment in 1966, Arab League's political position has been confined to narrowly-defined national interests of the member countries. In that sense, the League's recognition of the Syrian people's demands for democracy and freedom proved to be a critical step. The recent active and interventionist role that the League has endorsed in Libya and Syria hints at the first signs of change in the League's traditional status-quo oriented policies.

A look into the history of the Arab League displays the failure of the League to arrive at common position in Arab matters. Far from satisfying the Arab peoples' expectation of democratic change, the League has maintained its status-quo oriented position for decades while ignoring the demands of its member countries' citizens. The persistence of inter-regime disputes and sectarian tensions, and the presence of a global power like the US in the region have all played a role in the failure of the League to prevent or resolve regional conflicts. The League has neither realized political and economic cooperation between the member states.

Regarded as one of the exceptional decisions of the League, the suspension of Egypt's Arab League membership did not yield any concrete outcome either. Disbarment of Egypt from the Arab League came after the Camp David Accords that the country had brokered with Israel. However due to its anti-Iraq stance and support for the Gulf countries during the Gulf War, Egypt was readmitted to the Arab League in 1989 without any change in its position towards Israel. The Arab League did not bear effective impact in

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Arab Peace Initiative beyond issuing declarations that condemn Israel for its Palestinian policy. More recently, despair that the League displayed during the US invasion of Iraq rendered its institutional presence meaningless in the eyes of the Arab people.

However, the revolutions that began to shake the Middle East in early 2011 tailored a new role for the Arab League. Arab uprisings have spread from one country to the next, unseating the decades-old regimes of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, and placing many others in jeopardy. By shaking the delicate power balance in the region, the revolutions have made the region more susceptible to outside intervention; thus the regional response to the regional developments has become an urgent need.

In addition, some Arab leaders who are fearful that demands for democracy and freedom will spread to their countries have felt immediate need to pursue an active policy in order to control developments. Under these circumstances, Arab League has ascended to a central role in regional policy that is being pursued to address new challenges. The increasing activism of the League in the wake of the Arab Spring did not just stem from regional necessities only. The international conditions have also encouraged endorsement of a new role and function by the League. The presence of a regional organization with which Western countries could coordinate their regional policies has become important especially after the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan that caused Western countries serious legitimacy and credibility problems.

The Arab League has seized an opportunity to put in practice the active role that the Arab spring has provided the ground for. After the outbreak of hostilities in Libya, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) condemned Qaddafi's regime over its attacks on civilians and declared that the Libyan regime had lost its legitimacy. GCC's joint statement was followed by Arab League's decision to suspend Libya's membership and its calls on the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone on Libya to protect civilians. Led by mainly Gulf Countries, the Arab League countries have endorsed a similar position during the Syrian crisis and put pressure on the Syrian regime by suspending its Arab League membership and imposing sanctions on the country.

Though Arab League decisions may seem country-specific, they are significantly shaping the future of the region. By condemning the Syrian and Libyan regimes for disproportionate use of violence against their own people, the Arab League has somewhat found rightful the demand of Arab people. With these decisions, the League has signaled that it would move away from ideas of Arab nationalism and Arab unity in pursuit of further integration with the international system.

Nonetheless, the authoritarian state systems of most of the member states of the League make it difficult to regard Arab League decisions as steps supporting democracy. The League's "democratic stance" is an outcome of the pressure of revolutions as much as of harmony of interests among the member states. Even though strengthening democracy in the region seems like an unrealistic desire of member states, these decisions push each member towards thinking about change and thus pave the way for democratic reform process.

Analysis of transformation of the role and function of the Arab League in the wake of current developments is important for envisioning the future of the region. In this regard, the League's Syrian policy provides us with useful insights into the question of what kind of role the League would endorse in upcoming period. The study at hand consists of two parts. The first part addresses the League's policy proposals, decisions, and reactions regarding the Syrian crisis and concentrates on what these all policy measures mean for the League as a regional organization. The second part examines regional dynamics that play a crucial role in the current crisis by looking at different positions of regional and global actors on the Syrian crisis.

THE HISTORY OF THE ARAB LEAGUE

Established by Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia in 1945, the Arab League is the oldest international organization. The League that was founded to oppose post-World War II colonial expansionism rapidly came to play an active role in the struggle against the Jewish state in Palestine.

The organization that expanded to include a rising number of member countries reached a total of 22 members as of November 2011, including the now-suspended Syria. These are Lebanon, Iraq, Palestinian National Authority, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Djibouti, Mauritania, and the Comoros. Although its organization center was located in Cairo until 1979, the exclusion of Egypt in that year resulted in its relocation to Tunisia. However, once Egypt was readmitted ten years later, Cairo once again became the League's center.

The Arab League has three important bodies. These are the General Assembly, the Office of the Secretary-General, and permanent councils operating under the General Assembly. The General Assembly that is the League's most important institution consists of the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs of all member states. The Assembly where each and every member has a single vote convenes twice a year. However, emergency meetings—aside from ordinary summits—may take place if called for by two member countries. The General Assembly has no mechanism to force member states to abide by its resolutions. The Charter of the Arab League maintains that resolutions adopted with majority support are only binding for member states that voted in favor of the proposed legislation.

The League's administrative- and financial unit is the Secretary-General's office which is headed by the Secretary-General who is elected to his/her post with two-thirds majority. Departments working on political-, economic-, cultural-, legal- and social matters are also sorted under this institution. The current Secretary-General of the Arab League is Nabil el-Araby.

Permanent councils constitute yet another important unit in the Arab League organizational scheme. These conduct work on expert tasks such as politics, economics, communication, culture, social work, law, health, and human rights, as well as administrative and financial matters, and present their findings to the General Assembly.

Aside from these, the League's remaining main institutions are the Joint Defense Council that arose out of the Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Between the States of the Arab League signed in Cairo in 1950 and the Economic and Social Council. According to this document, a military attack against any member state or states shall be regarded by the remaining member states as an attack against their own territorial integrity. In this respect, Arab countries contribute to different extents to the Arab Peace Force founded to fight together against Israel in particular.

Ankara's calls on Assad to accede to opposition demands did not stop his brutal crackdown, in part because of Arab countries' lack of direct support for Turkey's efforts.

Cracking down on their own demonstrations in Bahrain, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries did not place actual pressure on Assad to cease violence against his own people.

A) ARAB LEAGUE IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Expansion of demonstrations across Syria drew attention to how the Arab world would react to the events in the country. The Arab world's initial silence to developments in Syria as opposed to Turkey's strong stance put Turkey in difficult diplomatic circumstances. Ankara's calls on Assad to accede to opposition demands did not stop his brutal crackdown, in part because of Arab countries' lack of direct support for Turkey's efforts. On the contrary, encouraged by the silence of Arab world, Assad regime aggravated the violence in order to clamp down on protests.

The reason behind Arab countries' silence toward protests in Syria from March through October 2011 is very much related to regional turmoil in the wake of the Arab spring. Political ambiguity in Egypt after the overthrow of Mubarak and NATO's Libyan operation kept the Arab countries' attention away from Syria. The reluctance of Gulf countries to take bold steps regarding Syria is another reason. Cracking down on their own demonstrations in Bahrain, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries did not place actual pressure on Assad to cease violence against his own people. The combined effect of these factors hindered the Arab League's ability to present an effective plan for Syria. However, in August of 2011, NATO's air operation in Libya began to yield some success as Libyan rebels were armed. This development bore significant repercussions for the region. The capture of Tripoli by the Libyan opposition made Qaddafi's overthrow almost certain, relieving the Gulf countries in particular. In the meantime, the Assad regime's failure to fulfil its reform pledges contributed to the growth of protests into a nationwide issue. The Syrian government's response was violent. Mounting death tolls drew strong criticism from the international community, including Arab countries. The Syrian regime was largely condemned by the Arab countries for its heavy use of weapons against civilians at the beginning of Ramadan. Going one step further, Saudi Arabia and Qatar withdrew their ambassadors to Syria. However, these diplomatic moves were not a unified Arab position; many countries still abstained from bluntly criticising the Assad regime.

The Arab League's first serious initiative concerning Syria was the Arab League Foreign Ministers' meeting that convened on October 16th in Egypt. Despite the anticipation that Syria's Arab League membership would be suspended, no such decision was made; however, the League called on Assad to stop the violence. The Arab League also demanded the initiation of talks between the Syrian government and opposition forces within 15 days. The League decided to set up a Syrian Committee to guide the process in coordination with both the Syrian government and the opposition. Qatar headed the committee, which included Arab League Chief Nabil El-Araby and delegates from Egypt, Algeria, Oman, and Sudan.¹

Arab League suspends Syria's Arab League membership

Following the October 16th meeting, the Syrian Committee headed by Qatar and comprised of delegates from Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, and Oman visited President Assad in

1. "Arab League calls for Syria dialogue within 15 days", *BBC News*, October 16, 2011.

Syria on October 26th and conveyed Arab League decisions to Syria.² Having accepted the Arab League Action Plan in a subsequent meeting held in Qatar on October 30th, Syria signed the Plan on the 2nd of November. The plan urged Syria to halt the violence, free political prisoners, open dialogue with the opposition, and allow observers and international media into the country.³ A day after the agreement was signed, Arab League chief Nabil el-Araby met with the Syrian National Council to inform its members of the Arab action plan.⁴ Yet, the Syrian regime failed to open dialogue within the Arab League's prescribed timeline, triggering intense debates about measures against the Assad regime ranging from suspension of Syria's Arab League membership to imposition of diplomatic and economic sanctions. With death tolls estimated by the UN at 3500 from March through November, the Arab League suspended Syria's Arab League membership in its extraordinary meeting of November 12th.⁵

The League approved the decision with 18 members in support, Yemen and Lebanon opposed, and Iraq abstaining. Suspension of a country that has long seen itself as the bastion of Arab nationalism had wide repercussions across the region. The suspension, however, was not the first of its kind. Libya's Arab League membership was also suspended in March 2011. However, given the strained relations between Muammar Qaddafi and the Arab World and the perception of Libya as a part of the African Union primarily, the League's Libya decision remained largely symbolic and was not as surprising as the Syria decision.

Following the suspension decision that came into effect on November 16th, the Arab League delivered another historic decision by imposing economic sanctions on the Syrian regime.⁶ Considered as one of the League's strongest statements since its establishment in 1945, this decision manifested the League's willingness to see policies evolve in the post-Arab spring. The League has showed that it will intervene in member states' internal affairs when peoples demand such action, even if intervention contradicts regimes' interests.

Nevertheless, the concerning decision kicked off legal debates with respect to the Arab League charter. Article Eight of the charter states that "each member-state shall respect the systems of government established in the other member-states and regard them as exclusive concerns of those states." The article goes on to maintain that "each shall pledge to abstain from any action calculated to change established systems of government." Another legal gap stems from Article 18 of the charter. According to Article 18, "the Council of the League may consider any state which fails to fulfill its obligations under the charter as separated from the League, this to go into effect upon a unanimous decision of the states, not counting the state concerned."⁷ Approval of the decision despite Yemen's and Lebanon's 'no' votes has sparked debates that the charter has

The Arab League also demanded the initiation of talks between the Syrian government and opposition forces within 15 days.

2. "Arab League holds 'frank and friendly' talks with Assad; 20 more killed in Syrian violence", *Al Arabia*, October 26, 2011

3. "Syrian acceptance of Arab League ceasefire plan met with scepticism", *Guardian*, November 2, 2011.

4. "Arab League chief meets Syria opposition group", *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 3, 2011.

5. "Arab League Votes to Suspend Syria Over Crackdown", *The New York Times*, November 12, 2011.

6. "Isolating Syria, Arab League Imposes Broad Sanctions", *The New York Times*, November 27, 2011.

7. Please see Arab League Charter <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/publisher/LAS,,,3ae6b3ab18,0.html>

Suspension of a country that has long seen itself as the bastion of Arab nationalism had wide repercussions across the region.

been violated. However, despite the debates, the Arab League has not explained the regulation on which the decision was based.

Legal controversies aside, Arab League's Syrian decision yielded several outcomes. First, the decision encouraged the Syrian opposition by suspending Syrian membership. The number of Syrian soldiers defecting to the opposition increased after the decision, which led to an escalation of violence across the country.⁸ Also, the decision moved the criticisms of the Syrian regime from ones that demanded reform to ones that demanded Assad's step down. King Abdullah of Jordan became the first Arab head of state to call for Assad to step down on November 14th.⁹

The Arab League's decision was also significant in ameliorating Turkey's difficult diplomatic circumstances after an initial lack of international support for Turkey's strong stance against the Syrian regime. Having maintained good relations both with Bashar Assad's regime and the opposition, Turkey initially hoped to use its influence with both sides to promote gradual democratization. Nevertheless, when Assad ignored Ankara's calls to accede to opposition demands and continued his brutal crackdown, Turkey toughened its position by adopting sanctions on the Syrian regime and supporting the protestors. However, international support for Turkey's efforts did not come immediately. In this respect, the Arab League's decision to suspend Syria's membership not only relieved Turkey; it also provided the U.S. and European countries—fearful of facing imperialist accusations—with an opportunity to pursue a more active policy.

The Arab League's sanctions include a travel ban against scores of senior officials, a freeze on Syrian government assets in Arab countries, a ban on transactions with Syria's central bank, and an end to all commercial exchanges with the Syrian government. Complementing previously-imposed U.S. and EU sanctions, Arab League and Turkish sanctions have begun to cripple the Syrian economy. The combined effect of the sanctions first and foremost hurt foreign investment. In an effort to save foreign currency reserves, the Syrian government imposed a ban on imports, which led to spiking inflation. The decision was reversed in response to the huge uproar from the business circles and consumers. The search for new foreign investors in China and Russia did not yield immediate improvements on the economic chaos. In light of these developments, the Syrian economy may have experienced double-digit contraction, according to some analysts, since the protests broke out.¹⁰

Arab League Observer Mission

Peaceful protests that began in Syria turned into an armed conflict between the regime and the protestors, provoking concerns that the country is slipping toward a civil war. When the social unrest and conflict escalated, the Arab League took a new initiative in December 2011. At first, the Syrian government did not welcome the Arab League Protocol (also known as Peace Plan), arguing that it violates Syria's sovereignty; however, facing increasing pressure both from the region and Western countries, the Syrian government eventually had to accept the deal.

8. "Syrian soldiers defecting in increasing numbers – UN", *Reuters*, November 10, 2011.

9. Lyse Doucet, "Syria's Assad should step aside, says Jordan's Abdullah", *BBC News*, November 15, 2011.

10. "The Effects of Economic Sanctions on Syria: Looking Lonely", *Economist*, November 28, 2011.

CHRONOLOGY

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|-------------------|---|
| 8 August 2011 | King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia recalls the Saudi ambassador to Syria and calls on president Bashar al-Assad to stop the violence. |
| 10 September 2011 | Nabil al-Araby said in a meeting with Assad that they were against any outside interference in Syria's internal affairs. |
| 16 October 2011 | Arab foreign ministers call for a national dialogue between the Syrian regime and the opposition to be held within 15 days, but fail to agree on suspending Syria's membership in the Arab League. |
| 26 October 2011 | An Arab ministerial delegation arrives in Damascus to meet President Bashar al-Assad. |
| 30 October 2011 | Syria met Arab League delegates in Qatar. |
| 2 November 2011 | Syria has agreed to end its violence against protesters, release political prisoners and start talks with the opposition within 15 days under a peace plan drawn up by Arab states. |
| 12 November 2011 | Syria's Arab League membership was suspended during the Arab League's foreign ministers meeting |
| 16 November 2011 | Suspension of Syria's Arab League membership took effect. Turkish-Arab Forum was held in the same meeting. |
| 27 November 2011 | Arab countries impose sanctions on Syria in order to economically diplomatically and politically isolate the country. |
| 19 December 2011 | Syria signs agreement to allow international observers into the country to monitor the implementation of an Arab League peace plan under the mediation of Iraq. |
| 28 December 2011 | Mustafa Dabi, tells Reuters that there is nothing frightening. |
| 8 January 2012 | The Arab League decided to extend their mission after having heard the first reports of their observers. They called for an end to the violence by both the Syrian government and opposition. |
| 14 January 2012 | The government of Qatar made a suggestion that Arab League states should send troops to prevent attacks of Syrian government forces to civilians. |
| 19 January 2012 | Deadline for Arab league observers ended. |
| 20 January 2012 | The leader of the Syrian National Council, Burhan Ghalioun went to Cairo to participate in the Arab League meeting. |
| 22 January 2012 | Saudi Arabia announced that it withdrew financial support. The Arab League prepared a peace plan in order to establish a national unity government where opposition groups and the government participate. |
| 23 January 2012 | Syria rejected Arab League call for establishing national unity government in order to stop violence, calling the initiative a "flagrant interference." |
| 25 January 2012 | Following Saudi Arabia, other Gulf countries withdrew their observers from the country. |
| 26 January 2012 | Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi stated that he will meet UN authorities on Thursday. |
| 28 January 2012 | The Arab League announced that it temporarily suspended the observer mission |
| 31 January 2012 | UN Security Council meetings began. |
| 4 February 2012 | Russia, China vetoed U.N. action on Syria. |
| 12 February 2012 | At a meeting of foreign ministers in Cairo, The Arab League asked the United Nations Security Council on Sunday to send a peacekeeping mission to Syria, called on Arab nations to sever diplomatic relations with Damascus in an effort to pressure the government to end the violence in the country, and supported "opening channels of communication with the Syrian opposition and providing all forms of political and financial support to it. |
| 16 February 2012 | The UN general assembly has approved a resolution backing an Arab League plan that calls on the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to step down and strongly condemns human rights violations in Syria by his regime. Resolution also urged to appoint a special envoy to Syria. |
| 24 February 2012 | Syria's Friends meeting was held with participation of more than 60 countries and representatives. |

The Arab League's decision was also significant in ameliorating Turkey's difficult diplomatic circumstances after an initial lack of international support for Turkey's strong stance against the Syrian regime.

Contrary to the reports submitted by Syrian opposition groups to international agencies, al-Dabi stated that there was nothing frightening in Homs, raising further concerns about the delegation's objectivity.

The Protocol allowing Arab observers into the country between Syria and Arab League was signed on December 19th, 2011 in Cairo under Iraqi mediation. It included initiation of talks between opposition and the government, end of violence, withdrawal of Syrian troops from cities and release of the prisoners.¹¹ While Russia and China welcomed that the Arab League assumed the role of mediator rather than bringing the Syrian issue to the Security Council, the U.S. and European countries pointed out that it was still uncertain who observers will monitor and in which cities they will carry out their observations. Moreover, Mustafa al-Dabi's appointment as the leader of the observer mission raised doubts about the reliability of the delegation—if not the mission itself. Having served as Sudanese military commander and intelligence officer, al-Dabi was accused of being involved in war crimes in Darfur.¹² On the other hand, the Syrian opposition rejected the agreement. The Syrian National Council gathered in Tunisia on the same day that Syria and the Arab League signed the protocol. It objected to the agreement and demanded that the international community recognize it as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people; implement a no fly zone; and create a buffer zone in Syria, among other demands.¹³

In the shadow of these arguments, the Arab League delegation consisting of 60 observers¹⁴ went to Damascus and began its mission on December 24th. Observers visited cities as determined by the Assad regime, including the protest hubs of Damascus, Homs, Daraa, and Hama. The mission established contact with both regime supporters and opposition groups to the limited extent permitted by the regime. Nevertheless, General al-Dabi's statements on Syria increased confusion rather than providing clarity. Contrary to the reports submitted by Syrian opposition groups to international agencies, al-Dabi stated that there was nothing frightening in Homs, raising further concerns about the delegation's objectivity.¹⁵ Criticisms of al-Dabi's career in Sudan intensified, and human rights groups called for the withdrawal of Arab observers from Syria.

That the same criticisms were also shared by the head of Arab Parliament, an advisory committee for the Arab League, and some Gulf countries notably Qatar cast shadow on the mission's credibility. Even though these criticisms were right to some extent, their expression by the highest political figures of the countries that contributed to the observer mission raised some question marks with the Arab League's view of the mission. Here, the choice of the mission chief was a highly contested issue. Another criticism was that observers failed to stop the Syrian regime's violence; however it was also problematic. The observer mission in Syria was not tasked with ending the violence but with monitoring whether or not the country is abiding by the Arab League protocol.

11. "Syria signs deal to allow Arab League observers into country", *Guardian*, December 19, 2011.

12. "Sudanese general's past casts shadow on Arab League mission", *France 24 International News*, December 26, 2011.

13. "U.S. skeptical of Syrian agreement on monitors; opposition criticizes 'new tactic'", *Al Arabia*, December 20, 2011.

14. The number of the observers from the Arab League increased from 60 to 170.

15. "Head of Syrian monitors reports Homs is calm but calls for further inquiry", *Al Arabia*, December 28, 2011.

The Arab League responded to criticisms by stating that there may be some mistakes in the plans of the Syrian National Committee. The League urged observers to remain in Syria longer.¹⁶ Qatar's call for a peace-keeping force in Syria,¹⁷ on the other hand, garnered harsh reactions of Syrian government and was not welcomed by other Arab countries either. Some Arab countries, including Algeria and Egypt, insisted the political crisis be solved through dialogue, and they opposed any military intervention by Gulf countries.

Disagreements in the Arab World on the resolution of Syrian issue also surfaced in the report prepared by observers. The observer report—which was criticized for not being officially announced—was presented in the Arab League's closed meeting on January 22, 2012. Criticizing the Syrian government for not fully implementing the protocol, the report—which was later leaked to several journals and websites—demanded increasing the number of observers and prolonging their mission. Meanwhile, it also revealed that some armed groups attacked public buildings, which, in essence, was interpreted by many as report's holding both parties responsible for the violence in the country.¹⁸

The conclusion of the report—that there is an anti-regime armed resistance in Syria—bothered Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have called for international intervention. Saudi Arabia opposed the extension of the observer mission and withdrew its own observers. This move contributed to the already-existing doubts about the reliability of the delegation. Following Saudi Arabia, other Gulf countries also withdrew their observers from the delegation. As a result, the mission size in Syria declined to 110 observers.¹⁹

The observer mission in Syria was not tasked with ending the violence but with monitoring whether or not the country is abiding by the Arab League protocol.

Arab League Peace Plan and bringing the issue to the UN

In the meeting held on January 22nd in Cairo, the Arab League presented a peace plan to be taken to the United Nations (UN). The plan which was quite similar to the one prepared for Yemen—called on Assad to hand power to his deputy, demanded the establishment of a national unity government within two months, and called for early elections, among other demands.²⁰ The report was backed by all Arab countries except Lebanon; however, countries disagreed on whether to take the plan to the UN Security Council. Algeria supported the plan of the Arab League but objected to taking the plan to the UN Security Council, arguing that if taken to the Security Council, the issue would be under the initiative of external actors.

Arab League's call for peaceful transfer of authority reflects a departure from the

16. "Syria: Arab League monitors have made 'mistakes', says Qatari prime minister", *The Telegraph*, January 6, 2012.

17. "Arab League may debate Syria troops call; U.N. chief tells Assad to 'stop killing'", *Al Arabia*, January 16, 2012.

18. The Arab League's observer report was not announced on its website. What exactly the report includes is unknown; however, following the meeting newspapers wrote similar things about the demands included in the report.

19. Alistair Lyon, "Arab League turns to U.N. as Gulf observers quit Syria", *Reuters*, January 24, 2012.

20. "Syria rejects Arab League plan for power transition; opposition welcomes initiative", *Al Arabia*, January 23, 2012

Criticizing the Syrian government for not fully implementing the protocol, the report—which was later leaked to several journals and websites—demanded increasing the number of observers and prolonging their mission.

League's traditional policy of non-interference. The Arab League—which has historically supported regimes at the expense of civilian populations—indicated that intervention of the member countries will not only include sanctions but may also result in regime changes. While this new political tendency of the Arab League in practice is not in line with the Arab League Charter, time will show whether the charter would be revised and how this process will influence the future of Arab League.

Mission leader Mustafa Al-Debi's statements that violence decreased in Syria—made one day after the Arab League announced its peace plan—revealed the divergence between the Arab League and observer mission.²¹ At the time, Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani and Arab League Chief Nabil El-Araby wrote to Ban Ki-moon requesting a meeting to take the issue to the UN Security Council. Meanwhile, Arab League delegates in close coordination with Western countries such as U.K. and France prepared a draft resolution to be submitted to the UN.²²

Reacting against the Arab League's initiative that would bring the Syrian issue before the international community, Syria approved the Arab League's decision to prolong the observer mission by one month but announced that it will not approve the League's proposal that Assad transfer power.²³ Responding to the Syrian announcement, the Arab League suspended the observer mission on of January 26th.²⁴ This move was interpreted by many that Arab countries might be willing to break ties with the Assad regime.

UN meetings beginning on January 31st continued until February 4th, when the peace plan was put to a vote in the Security Council. The draft resolution submitted by Morocco to the UN Security Council demanded that the Syrian regime put an end to the violence, cease arbitrary detention, launch a dialogue process embracing all political groups, and hold free elections. Moreover, it called on Assad to transfer executive power to his vice-president, and it called on UN to take necessary measures to support Arab League efforts to find a political resolution to the crisis.²⁵ During the meetings Arab and Western countries reiterated their support for the draft resolution and delivered their speeches in order to reassure Russia—which expressed concern that the decision would simply enable Western military intervention.

Their efforts to reassure Russia continued throughout the meetings. A new draft resolution incorporated changes that responded to Russian objections.²⁶ In spite of these efforts, China and Russia objected to language that held Bashar Assad solely responsible for the violence, and both nations vetoed the Security Council resolution on Feb-

21. Alistair Lyon, "Syria denounces Arab League for telling Assad to quit", *Reuters*, January 23, 2012.

22. Edmund Blair and Ayman Samir, "Arabs seek U.N. support for Syria peace plan", *Reuters*, January 24, 2012.

23. Bassem Mroue, "Thousands on streets as Syria rejects peace plan", *The Independent*, January 24, 2012.

24. "Arab League suspends observer mission as Syria vows to 'cleanse outlaws'", *Al Arabia*, January 28, 2012.

25. "UN draft resolution on Syria", *Guardian*, January 31, 2012.

26. Upon the objection of Russia, the draft resolution left out the requirement that Assad step down and omitted a provision for arms embargo.

ruary 4, 2012.²⁷ Russia's and China's vetoes drew international condemnation. The U.S. called Russia's veto disgraceful, and the U.K. stated that it was terrified by the decision. The Arab League stated that Russia and China will have Syrian blood on their hands because of their vetoes.

Following the Russian and Chinese vetoes, the Assad regime intensified its operations in Homs. The regime's relentless military operations in the city forced the international community to develop a new initiative for Syria. The "Friends of Syria" initiative first proposed by the U.S. and France found support in the Arab world.²⁸ The first "Friends of Syria" meeting was held in Tunisia on the 24th of February. Representatives from around 70 countries—including the U.S., Turkey, European countries, and Arab countries—participated in the meeting. Russian and Chinese representatives did not participate on the accounts that the Syrian government was not invited to the meeting. During the meeting, the possibility of military intervention in Syria was not raised; however the group called on the Assad government to immediately cease all violence and permit humanitarian agencies to deliver humanitarian aid. The Syrian National Council was also recognized as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people, though it was not given exclusive recognition. The group also called for new sanctions on the Assad regime. The final declaration of the meeting did not cite the Arab League's proposal for deploying peacekeepers in Syria under the supervision of the Arab League and the UN. As a result, Saudi Arabia withdrew from the group, accusing "Friends of Syria" initiative of inactivity.²⁹

As a complementary step, the Arab League, in its February 11th meeting in Cairo, decided to sever diplomatic relations with Syria. To increase pressure on Syria, the Arab League decided to send a joint peacekeeping force with the UN and to provide all forms of economic and political support to the Syrian opposition.³⁰ Lebanon and Algeria approved the decision; however, they opposed the provision on deploying peacekeeping forces. Syria refused to recognize the decision, while the U.S. and the EU welcomed it. Russia argued that peacekeeping forces should only be deployed after the violence in Syria ends.

The Arab League decision is significant in the sense that it is the body's second decision in less than a year, which was argued to open the way for an international intervention in an Arab country. The first decision concerning Libya made NATO intervention possible and thus contributed to the overthrow of Qaddafi. By proposing to deploy peacekeeping forces in Syria, the Arab League, in a way, strengthened the hands of arguments for foreign intervention. However, the authority and size of this force were not mapped out. Therefore, one cannot argue that Arab League's concerned decision was calling for a direct intervention, as in the case of Libya, because it is not clear yet

Arab League's call for peaceful transfer of authority reflects a departure from the League's traditional policy of non-interference.

27. "Syria resolution vetoed by Russia and China at United Nations", *Guardian*, February 4, 2012.

28. "ABD: 'Suriye'nin dostları' toplanabilir", *Hürriyet Planet*, February 9, 2012.

29. "Friends of Syrian People' call for end to violence in Syria, urges more sanctions", *Al Arabia*, February 24, 2011.

30. "Arab League Steps Up Pressure on Syria and Calls for U.N. Help", *The New York Times*, February 12, 2012.

Following the Russian and Chinese vetoes, the Assad regime intensified its operations in Homs. The regime's relentless military operations in the city forced the international community to develop a new initiative toward Syria.

whether the Arab League's proposal involves a peacekeeping force or a peace-building one. Europe and U.S. welcomed the draft resolution; however, Western countries are still unwilling to pursue direct military intervention.

Despite the deadlock in the Security Council, Qatar and Saudi Arabia took the Syrian issue to the UN General Assembly. The draft resolution condemned the Assad regime for resorting to violence, called on the UN to support Arab initiatives with regard to the Syrian issue.³¹ The resolution was approved by 137 member states. Though the decision is a non-binding one with no power of enforcement, it is still important in increasing the diplomatic pressure on Syria.³²

The Arab League's Syria policy reflects a shift from the League's traditional policies. With the escalation of the crisis as of the summer of 2011, the League has developed several initiatives on Syria. While continuing to put pressure on the regime, the League helped the Syrian opposition unite. Particularly when the Gulf countries developed policies against another member of the Arab League in cooperation with the West, observers regarded this as a shift away from the idea of "Arab Unity". The Arab League's disagreement with Russia and China over the Syrian issue may result in a more Western-aligned future policy.

B) THE ARAB LEAGUE'S SYRIAN POLICY AND ITS BACKGROUND

Thanks to its geographical position, multi-faith and multi-ethnic demographics, and complex foreign ties, Syria is often seen as the fault line of the region. Developments in this junction of regional competition naturally render the country critical for both its neighbors as well as for the broader Middle East. Additionally, the sectarian aspect of the Syrian crisis led to a differentiation of policies and resolution strategies adopted by a variety of actors that have been involved in the situation since the very beginning.

The Arab League's Syrian policy—which was discussed in greater detail in the first part—cannot be explained merely with reference to the organization's desire play a greater role in the region. After all, a more significant future role for the League is less of a conscious choice and increasingly a necessity that arises out of recent developments. Therefore, it is necessary to consider rising Shi'a movements that fuel Iranian-Saudi contestation in order to better understand the anti-Assad alliance across the Arab world.³³

The U.S. invasion of Iraq was a turning point in this sense. The United States, by way of intervening in the country and incorporating previously-suppressed Shi'a groups into politics, facilitated a transformation—neither foreseen nor intended—of a Sunni dic-

31. "Syria draft resolution heads to UN General Assembly", *BBC News*, February 11, 2012

32. While 12 members including Russia and China vetoed the draft resolution, 17 members including Lebanon abstained.

33. For a more detailed analysis on the so-called Shi'a Revival in the region, see. Vali Nasr (2007), *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, W. W. Norton & Company.

tatorship (under Saddam Hussein) into a new government favoring Shi'a Arabs. Their increasing power after the 2003 invasion earned them considerable control within the Iraqi National Unity government that has been in power since 2010. Similarly, growing Hizballah military and political activity by Hizballah in Lebanon suggests that Iran and her regional extensions enjoy greater influence.³⁴ The Hizballah that considerably amplified its regional power since its successful 2006 struggle against Israel became one of the coalition partners in 2011. Iran's rise as manifested in these two developments deepened the Iranian-Saudi competition at a regional level.

The Arab Spring that coincided with such a regional conjuncture aggravated the competition as well. Spreading among Arab countries one by one, popular movements overthrew Egyptian leader Mubarak, a prominent Iranian opponent, to reach the Gulf countries—home to a considerable Shi'a population. Particularly in Bahrain where an estimated 70 percent of the people practice Shi'ism, peaceful protests turned out to be a cause of concern for the power-holding elite.³⁵ In fact, Saudi Arabian security forces' suppressing of these demonstrations served as perhaps the best manifestation of Iranian-Saudi tensions.

In order to better grasp Syria's part in this entire regional competition, one ought to focus on the Assad regime's strategic alliance with Iran and its regional proxies. Assad—who established a complex relationship with Hizballah—served as a primary channel for Iranian aid to the organization.³⁶ Following his father's death, Bashar Assad strengthened his ties with Hizballah with an ever-increasing political influence in Lebanon, and both continued to exert power over Lebanon. In this way, he secured a more influential position in the Arab-Israel peace process thanks to Hizballah's feud with Israel.³⁷ Syria's strategic partnership with Iran, on the other hand, resulted in the country's tendency to lean more toward Iran than toward the Arab world in terms of regional policy. Also, inviting 1.3 million Iraqi refugees (most of them Sunnis), the country boosted her influence over Iraq's domestic dynamics and security in the post-Saddam era.³⁸

This role that the Syrian regime assumed in the Shi'a alliance served as the driving force for the Arab League's policy under the leadership of the Gulf countries. The end of Ba'ath rule in Syria will strike a serious blow to the Iran-led Shi'a bloc. This will both weaken Hizballah in Lebanon and undo thirty years of Iranian influence over Syria to isolate the Ahmadinejad government. Therefore, Saudi Arabia—which continues to pursue a sect-oriented regional leadership race with Iran—regards developments in Syria as an opportunity to boost its own influence in the Middle East.

The Arab League, in its February 11th meeting in Cairo, decided to send a joint peacekeeping force with the UN and to provide all forms of economic and political support to the Syrian opposition

34. For more information on Hizballah, see. Augustus Richard Norton (2007), *Hezbollah*, Princity University Press.

35. Marina Ottaway, "Bahrain: Between the United States and Saudi Arabia", *Carneige Endowment Commentary*, April 4, 2011; Amir Taheri, "Ticking bomb of the Gulf", *New York Post*, April 3, 2011; Ethan Bronner, "Bahrain Tears Down Monument as Protesters Seethe", *The New York Times*, March 18, 2011.

36. Abbas William Samii (2008), "A Stable Structure on Shifting Sands: Assessing the Hizballah-Iran-Syria Relationship", *The Middle East Journal*, 62(1), pp.32-53.

37. Emile El-Hokayem (2007), "Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship", *The Washington Quarterly*, 30(2), pp.35-52.

38. *World Refugee Survey 2008-Syria*, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants.

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The Assad regime's potential collapse in Syria—which gained considerable power in the region since Hizballah's 2006 victory over Israel—might create new opportunities for Saudi Arabia in an area otherwise denied to her. Also, the Gulf countries' replacing Syria as the patron of allegedly non-sectarian Hamas will serve to strengthen Saudi Arabia's hand in its competition with Israel. The ongoing Qatar-led and Saudi-assisted diplomacy conducted to get Hamas out of Syria is therefore an important effort.

Qatar is another country which came to the forefront of Saudi Arabia's strife with Iran over Syria. The country emerged as the architect of a great many Arab League resolutions against the Assad regime. Leaving its mark on a variety of decision-making processes from the suspension of Syria's membership in the League to the observer mission settlement as well as the Syrian crisis being brought to the United Nations Security Council, Qatar demonstrated an active diplomacy to attract substantial attention. It is possible to claim that Qatar—able to shape both Arab and Western perceptions on Middle East politics through the Al Jazeera network—shaped its policy toward the Arab Spring in coordination with Saudi Arabia. These two actors that previously endorsed the NATO intervention in Libya also served to design the Arab League's resolutions with regard to the Syrian crisis. Most recently, the countries recalled their monitors from Syria to strike a serious blow to the Arab League observer mission. They also took the Arab course of action to the UNSC and played a significant role in internationalizing the matter.

The single most important reason behind the Gulf countries' encouraging role in the League's Syrian policy is Egypt's failure due to ongoing economic and political turmoil to adopt a strong enough position to match her traditional influence within the organization. Although Egypt continues to create the expectation that it will reemerge as the leader in Arab matters after Mubarak's fall, continued political and economic uncertainty proves that such a role remains elusive for the country at this time. After all, Egypt's position throughout the process failed to find a third way aside from the Gulf countries' strong pro-intervention stance and countries like Lebanon and Iran that continue to support the Assad regime. Despite its support for all Syria-related resolutions, Egypt's inability to exceed its role as the host for Arab League conventions resulted in an increasingly active role for the Gulf countries in decision-making processes.

The one element that complicates the 22-country Arab League's Syrian policy is the disagreements between neighboring countries that are directly affected by the Syrian crisis and the remaining regional actors. Lebanon's concerns that regime change in Syria would destabilize its fragile ethnic and sectarian balance voted against a number of propositions including the suspension of Syria's membership, the sanctions, and the crisis's referral to the UNSC. Considering Syria's role in Lebanon's domestic affairs as well as her influence over Hizballah, change in Syria may be rightfully expected to affect Lebanon disproportionately. However, Lebanese domestic politics does not display a monolithic approach to Syria either. While Hizballah supports the Assad regime, the March 14th alliance sides with opposition forces.

The Maliki government in Iraq is another actor who supports the Syrian regime, albeit less than its Lebanese counterpart. The Iraqi government's position vis-à-vis the Syrian crises parallels the Iranian policy. PM Nouri al-Maliki, notwithstanding his calls for reform, argues that demonstrations played a negative role, while he also welcomed Assad's official envoys to end Syria's isolation, and opposed anti-Syria steps by the Arab League. The Maliki government also closed transportation routes between pro-embargo Turkey and the Gulf countries that would bypass Syrian territory.

Maliki, who emphasizes his opposition to economic sanctions targeting Syria, also maintains that a potential civil war and sectarian violence in Syria would greatly affect his country. Commentators close to the Iraqi government state that post-Assad geopolitical struggle in the region would inevitably focus on Iraq—a development that would risk the country's security. Furthermore, Baghdad emphasizes its lack of preparation for 1.3 million Iraqi refugees currently residing in Syria to instantly returning to their home country. On the other hand, it is also foreseeable that Iraqi political equilibrium based on polarization and built along ethno-sectarian lines would likely be altered by an influx of refugees, 80 percent of whom are from Baghdad and 63 percent of whom are Sunni.³⁹

The Iraqi government also initiated efforts for the peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis and in this sense acted as a mediator between Syria and the Arab League to facilitate the observer mission agreement. Despite this, the Maliki government abstained with regard to the suspension of Syria's membership and voted against the Arab League sanctions. However, given the current state of the humanitarian crisis, Iraq gave up on this approach that contradicted the international consensus. During the United Nations General Assembly vote to call for an immediate halt to all violence in Syria, the Iraqi government voted in favor, even though Iran voted against the resolution and Lebanon abstained.⁴⁰ The Maliki government also announced that Bashar Assad shall not be invited to the Arab League summit scheduled to take place in Baghdad in late March 2012.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The Arab League that for the most part maintained its silence at the initial stages of the Syrian crisis was forced to take an active stance due to the risk of intensifying violence that could spread to surrounding countries. The organization resolved to adopt a policy that bears considerable resemblance to the Turkish position based on regional attempts and international assistance, and proceeded to take certain steps that owed a great deal to pressure from its member countries. Although the League's Syrian policy

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39. UNHRC Syria Update, Winter 2010, http://un.org.sy/forms/publications/files/Winter_Update_2010.pdf.

40. General Assembly adopts resolution condemning 'widespread and systematic' Human Rights violations by Syrian Authorities, UN, 165 February 2012, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/ga11207.doc.htm>.

41. El Irak: Suriye leyset meduvve li huzur'il gimmeti'l Arabiyyeti fi Baġdad, Rusya'l Youm, 25 February 2012, http://arabic.rt.com/news_all_news/news/579372/.

the Arab League's willingness to play an active role toward Syria is important from a Russian and Chinese perspective since this would precisely prevent international intervention attempts.

causes mixed reactions at this stage, its efforts received support from international actors. Many observers also admit that foreign intervention to resolve the Syrian crisis may result in adverse reactions. It is also possible to claim that the Obama administration that already withdrew from Iraq and plans to do so in Afghanistan by the end of 2014 is unlikely to become directly involved in the country. European countries that face similar economic challenges are also unwilling to bear the burden of direct intervention. As a matter of fact, although European leaders welcomed the Arab League's proposal to send a UN-AL joint peace force to Syria, they also voiced their opposition to foreign intervention. In this sense, the Arab League's active role vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis was received positively in the West.

On the other hand, the Arab League's willingness to play an active role toward Syria is important from a Russian and Chinese perspective since this would precisely prevent international intervention attempts. Although the Russian- and Chinese governments do not support the organization's Syrian policy thus far, they did express their interest in peaceful resolution. Turkey—which advocated early on that the matter be handled regionally—both has encouraged and supported the Arab League's steps with regard to the Syrian crisis.

However, the Arab League's intense efforts regarding regional issues failed to craft a shared regional position. The complex set of relations between member countries and external actors with conflicting regional interests deprived the organization of healthily functioning decision-making mechanisms, and therefore gave rise to suspicions that the League's resolutions were open to external influences. The difficult-to-tackle security aspect of regional issues necessitates different options including intervention and sanctions to be kept on the table at all times. Given the Arab world's lack of experience in this area, the League's ability to unilaterally formulate policy proves rather limited.

On the other hand, the Arab Spring ushered in new areas such as adhering to democratic demands and safeguarding human rights that are indeed unconventional for the Arab League. The fact that most member states are not governed by participatory political regimes renders it challenging for the League to respond to cases of popular pro-democracy demonstrations as in Syria. At this point, a need emerged for the Arab League to increase its democratic experience as well. The Arab League started to emerge as a significant regional actor thanks to its role in addressing the Syrian crisis as well as in its international efforts to resolve the matter. The organization also proved that it possesses the ability to form new alliances in order to address emerging problems with regional solutions.

Suspension of Syria's Arab League membership in November 2011 could be characterized as a turning point in Arab league's 66-year old history. By condemning the Syrian and Libyan regimes for disproportionate use of violence against their own people, the Arab League has somewhat found rightful the demand of Arab people. the League has signaled with these decisions that it would move away from ideas of Arab nationalism and Arab unity in pursuit of further integration with the international system.

On the other hand, the authoritarian state systems of most of the member states of the League make it difficult to regard Arab League decisions as steps supporting democracy. The League's "democratic stance" is an outcome of the pressure of revolutions as much as of harmony of interests among the member states. Even though strengthening democracy in the region seems like an unrealistic desire of member states, these decisions push each member towards thinking about change and thus pave the way for democratic reform process.

The study at hand consists of two parts. The first part addresses the League's policy proposals, decisions, and reactions regarding the Syrian crisis and concentrates on what these all policy measures mean for the League as a regional organization. The second part examines regional dynamics that play a crucial role in the current crisis by looking at different positions of regional and global actors on the Syrian crisis.

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