



The Arab League confronts Assad

ONE OF THE MANY UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS over the past year has been the return to relevance of the Arab League. Founded in 1945 in the waning days of World War II, the League of Arab States has been a largely toothless organization, scorned by the Arab public and ignored by the international community. The League's weakness was a reflection of the deep divisions within the Arab state system and the overall



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weakness of Arab states, individually and collectively.

However, beginning with the uprising in Libya in March 2011, and now with the ongoing uprising in Syria, the League's actions have become an important part of the international diplomatic maneuverings. This is partly due to the widespread support throughout the Arab world for the mass protests, which have challenged previously unshakable authoritarian regimes.

As a result, most, if not all Arab governments are more attuned to public opinion than previously. Western governments, for their part, have concluded that they should support political reform whenever possible. Of course, geopolitical and inter-Arab considerations are important parts of the equation as well. Paradoxically, it has been the Gulf monarchies, which had earlier banded together to save one of their own, Bahrain, from the wave of protests, which have taken the lead in shaping the collective Arab position (Qatar more visibly, Saudi Arabia more quietly).

These trends first tentatively came together over Libya. Muammar Gaddafi was an easy target: the Gulf monarchs had always been among his primary adversaries. Hence, an Arab League endorsement of the UN-proposed "no fly zone" was cobbled together by a bare majority of League members; half of them didn't even attend the meeting. This, in turn, was quickly translated into the NATO air campaign (which included Qatar's and the UAE's participation) without which Gaddafi would have not been overthrown.

The legitimacy provided by the League was reminiscent of a similar decision in 1990 by a bare majority of Arab leaders that legitimized the US-led coalition's successful campaign to reverse Saddam's annexation of Kuwait. In that case, however, much of the Arab "street" was infuriated with the move. This time, the "street" and the considerations of most governments had converged.

The activation of the League mechanism in the Syrian crisis was slower in coming, although certainly not because of any particular love for the Syrian regime among most other Arab leaders. Indeed, for decades, even as the Syrian Ba'ath regime proclaimed itself the exemplar and defender of Arab rights and values, it usually found



itself in a distinct minority on regional issues. Rather, the incremental response reflected the uncertainty over what course of action to pursue and the high stakes in the outcome.

By mid-November, as the Syrian opposition displayed its resilience against the regime's increasing repression, and the conflict began to look like a civil war, the League came down, almost unanimously, against the Syrian regime. In January, Assad sought to buy time by accepting an Arab League observer mission to monitor developments and promote an end to the violence, but he had no intention of following the League's directives.

In the wake of the mission's failure, the League called for Assad to step down in favor of his vice president, and the establishment of a national unity government. The plan was endorsed by the US, EU and Turkey, but vetoed in the Security Council by Russia and China. Now, the Assad regime has chosen to try and stamp out the opposition by employing an updated version of the "Hama Rules," US journalist Thomas Friedman's term describing Hafez Assad's wanton destruction of Hama's old quarter in 1982, killing many thousands of its residents, in order to quell a Muslim Brotherhood uprising. In response, the Arab League has called for a joint Arab-UN peacekeeping force. Saudi leaders, sensing an opportunity to deal a strategic blow to Iran by toppling its primary ally in the Arab world, have spoken out against Assad more forcefully than is usually their wont.

The Arab League's leverage remains limited. Moreover, it would be wrong to conclude that the League's reactivation portends the beginning of a new Arab era based on functioning institutions, democratic values, and regional cooperation and development. Nonetheless, at least in political terms, the League has gained a new lease on life. ●

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