Introduction

The Arab League has fostered cooperation between Arab states since its founding in 1945. Its membership has grown from six original signatories to twenty-two Member States, plus Observer States, that stretch from the Maghreb to the Indian Ocean. Since the first days of the Arab emancipation and the Arab Revolt against their imperial Ottoman Turkish rulers in 1916, many Arabs have dreamed of a single Arab entity to unify its far-flung peoples. While such unity hasn’t been seen in hundreds of years, the Arab world may need to cooperate further with one another to face the many threats that geography, international terrorism, vast youth unemployment, corruption, and external threats pose.

Integration and unification of the Member States of the Arab League is an old but still distant goal. The Arab League has little in common with the far more advanced European Union (EU), in which Member States give up sovereignty to maximize trade and easy human movement. It also is behind much more modest regional organizations the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), that have done more to promote free trade. Why has the Arab League not achieved more, despite the great similarities of many of its members? And what can be done to make the Arab World more coherent, unified and powerful?

Mission

The Arab League’s mission is to enact reforms to better integrate the policies and laws of its Member States, whether it be politically, militarily, economically, or socially. It is up to each delegation to contribute its countries views on integration, and to ensure its position is well served in any final decisions. Integration and reform can occur across the whole of the league all at once in a single resolution or can be proposed and voted on piece meal in sections that pertain to different types of integration. In some cases integration at a sub-regional level among smaller groupings of states within the Arab League may be conceived, but as this is a meeting of the entire Arab League it is preferred that proposals mostly pertain to the whole entire organization.

A major barrier to integration is presence of observer states, non-members like Turkey who are Islamic, but not Arab. How much can thy be included in integration plans? If not included, do they have an incentive and the power to stop the others?

Who is an Arab?

Arab is a cultural and linguistic term referring to those who speak Arabic as their first language, have cultural likeness with common notions of Arab cultural expression, and self-identify as an Arab. It should be noted, Arab is not a religious term. Likewise, nowhere in the Arab League Charter does it mention religion. Though the Arab World encompasses an estimated 420 million people and expands over a massive area, Arabs as a group are relatively homogenous given their size. The Arab language has many dialects across the Arab world that can challenge Arabs to understand one another at times, and there are still differences in custom that influence the people in different regions.
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However, these are small given the cultural similarities that bind Arabs together as a common people.  

How the League Works

The league itself is an international organization comprised entirely of states with populations and, therefore governments, who culturally identify as Arab states. To clarify, a culture is not a religion or race, but set of commonly held values that center around history, custom, and language. The league's charter has a few details it would be good to know. A majority of decisions of the league are binding only to the states that accept them, and unanimous decisions are binding upon all (Article 7). Each member shall respect the system of government in the other states (Article 8). In case of aggression upon any member an emergency convening can be called where decisions are made unanimously upon how to deal with the threat (Article 6). If further integrations are to become a reality, it is possible the charter will need to be amended. If so, a 2/3 majority is needed (Article 19). Such possible amendments could reform any number of procedural or constitutional items, but that will be left to the body’s imagination.

Past Integration Attempts

Arabs as a people have been divided and occupied for hundreds of years, but there have been contemporary attempts by Arab heads of state like Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya to unite at least portions of the Arab world together. Many of these attempts were founded in appeals to popular Pan-Arabism or a grasp at power, but their failures show how to improve upon their mistakes. The United Arab Republic, 1958-1961, was a union between Egypt and Syria under Nasser, at the time the Egyptian President. The primary reason for its formation was strategic convenience that was too good to pass up. Its failure was due almost entirely to Nasser’s own policies. He isolated his political supporters in Syria in a move to consolidate power, and instituted very unpopular policies of reform that didn’t win him much support and didn’t fix many problems. Similar plans for unity were proposed by former Libyan dictator Gaddafi. He attempted to unify Libya with Tunisia and another state of North Africa, and another time with Egypt and Syria. These


attempts were called the Arab Islamic Republic and Federation of Arab Republics respectively.⁴

All of these plans failed for multiple reasons, particularly each leader’s inability to come to an understanding on how to integrate their very different countries. The competition and consolidation of personal power has also constantly and regularly thwarted many attempts at unity. If this body is to succeed in its goal, then it required the creation of a system that plays to mutual benefit and protects the interest of the component members involved without appearing to be a clear power grab for one leader or another. Additionally, they need to accept the very different social and economic systems each state operates under, and plan some sort of methodology to handle these differences. Finally, Arab leaders need follow through. Many agreements have been made in the spirit of Pan-Arabism to appease the public, but would then be ignored.

Integration

Integration can mean something different depending on how much integration a group of states intend to press. At one end is political integration, fully incorporating different states together to have one fully sovereign unit, but issues are abound when tackling the daunting task of integrating a state’s economy, immigration, security, and foreign policy. Many states in the league have partnerships with cooperation groups with other Arab states in smaller groupings.

One such group is Arab Maghreb Union, created in 1989. The purpose of this five member union of North African states was to enhance the free movement of goods and people and the revision of customs policy, with the possibility of political union. The grouping has several internal bodies including an investment bank, an international tribunal, and council of foreign ministers.⁵ Yet for all of this, the grouping has never been capable of making real progress due to internal political squabbles, chiefly between Algeria and Morocco.⁶

Another, and overall more successful, regional bloc of Arab states is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which has recently changed its name to the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. This grouping of six states, all centered on the Persian Gulf, have several different cooperative and international groupings, but one of the most significant is their recent finalization of a Customs Union between all six states. This has free trade between them, a common external tariff, and a system of shared customs duties based off economic weigh.⁷


Security Integration

Arab states have also looked to integrate their respective military apparatuses for greater collective security, as well as a tool to be used against what many view as their common enemy, Israel. While the League has attempted to do this in the past it could be something this body can attempt to rebrand in a more efficient and lasting manner. The first United Arab Command (UAC) was created by a unanimous resolution of the then thirteen member states of the League in 1964. Its goal was to direct better organization and training for the Arab militaries, but also coordinate a standard set Arab strategies, weaponry, and tactics for collective defense and offense against Israel. The organization became debunked after its inaction during the 6 Day War. Even before this it was already frozen by inaction due to disagreements amongst its members over who would be in command, and Arab states refusing to allow the stationing of troops in each other’s territory.

The former GCC, the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, has also created joint security apparatuses and taken notable strides towards greater integration. Peninsula Shield is a joint military unit that comprised of 30,000 troops in 2014, and sent troops to Bahrain to quell the protests there. They have also committed to the creation of a different joint military command that is more like a joint strategic planning council than a fully cooperative military network.

Militarily the League has uncertainty and instability in many locations. Libya is still torn apart by civil war as different militias jockey for position. Though the Arab League has recognized the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimate government of the country, and the NTC represent Libya as the council it still does not control large sections of the country.

The Islamic State (IS), known as Daesh by its adversaries in the Arab World, is, of course, a threat to the League. Among its highest goals is creation of a Caliphate, religious rule throughout the Islamic world. This makes Islamic State an explicit advocate of complete Arab and Islamic integration.

Islamic State has shown its ability to expand by taking over huge parts of Iraq and Syria, and also found new and dangerous chapters in unrelated states, like has been seen in Libya, Yemen, and Nigeria. As a result of many international coalitions bombarding Daesh, including members of this League, they are slowly being constricted from all sides. Despite this, Daesh still poses a threat.

Yemen is also racked by civil war. The Houthi rebels control much of the country’s northwest, and extremist groups, some affiliated with Daesh, also occupy certain portions of the

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8 “United Arab Command,” America Pink,  
http://america.pink/united-arab-command_4593088.html

9 http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2015/03/201533164429153675.html

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countryside. The Houthi rebels are supported by Iran in an attempt to expand its own influence in Arabia. Within the civil war, Saudi Arabia leads a coalition of mostly Arab states in support of the Yemeni government to combat the rebels and restore President Hadi to power.

While this council is not convening to draw battle plans, it could create or organize apparatuses through reforms to create a framework to fight common enemies and defend its territory. At the moment, each of these conflicts is either being fought with or depending on the strength of foreign powers. It may, or may not, be in the interest of the League to establish a system so that Arabs do not have to depend on the assistance from foreign powers. Without detailed planning any hastily organized group will fall apart just as their predecessors have. Issues of who will command, when forces can cross international borders, if League forces are allowed to intervene in internal matters, when/what would invoke joint actions, and most importantly how deep would any military integration go, are all questions that need to be answered, and depend on each state’s self-interest. It should also be accepted that in some cases it may not be in the interest of certain states to collaborate depending on what they see as important.

Economic Integration

Economically, the Arab world has many assets and liabilities that it needs to contend with. Economic integration can be as drastic as an EU model or as weak as the agreements made by the League in the past. What is certain is that any level of economic integration will affect each
state differently, and each delegate should look the weaknesses and strengths of their own economy to see how it may benefit from economic integration.

For 60 years, the Economic and Social Council (ESC), a body formed by the Arab League itself and was designated create a common market for all Arab states, has done very little to actually achieve its goal. The ESC has created the Greater Arab Free Trade Area, designed to slowly remove tariffs starting in 1998, but little has been done to make this an effective economic tool.\textsuperscript{11}

One step to improve the interdependence of Arab states would be to promote increased trade among states inside the league. Only 10\% of trade by Arab League member states is between other League states, compared to 60\% with the EU. To do this, states can remove certain trade barriers like tariffs, which are taxes placed on all goods on their way into a country, and can at times be called a customs duty. This, however, has been done in the past, only to be replaced by nontariff barriers to regional trade where states would apply restrictions upon imports in other ways. Incentives would be given to companies to not invest money in projects abroad, and certain requirements would have to be met before importing or exporting could occur. Trade is hampered when companies' become uninterested in exporting their goods due to poor exchange rates and high loan interest rates. All of these factors and others make it unattractive of unprofitable to trade or export with neighboring countries.\textsuperscript{12}

Simple reforms could be made to assist businesses through processes like making it easier to borrow money or to transport their goods, but to be clear, this alone would not be satisfactory solution to the problem. Different levels of economic integration can be found on the chart above, but this is a body with plenty of power, and you may attempt to enact a certain degree of integration based on these levels, or you may attempt something totally different, and in fact you are encouraged to do so.\textsuperscript{13}

Little has been accomplished in regards to integration of the Arab League due to a combination of mistrust and a desire to protect individual members' local industries. But, with huge unemployment rates, especially around highly educated youth, and low oil price (for the handful of states in the League who have oil) the economy of several League member states are in need of assistance to start moving forward again. The Arab League will need to begin experimenting with one another to see what can stimulate economic growth.

Conclusion


The Arab League represents the interests of the second largest ethnic group in the world, blessed to be unified with a common heritage, culture, and language, but for centuries they have fallen prey to internal division and foreign domination. If Arab states could put aside their petty squabbles and come together they could finally begin to prosper as a people. This, like all great feats, is not without challenges. There are huge differences in government, economics, and security within Arab league member states that make each member different, and that will all need to be overcome in turn. Integration does not have to happen all at once, but if this meeting of the Arab League can make progress on some of these issues, together a brighter future for all could be realized. With that being said, it is still the duty of each delegation to act according to their own interests, and find compromise that would bring prosperity, security, and dignity to the countries they represent.