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League of Arab States Update No. 1: Military Cooperation for the Establishment of Regional Peace and Security

Introduction

As several conflicts simultaneously threaten the peace and stability of the Middle East and the surrounding region, cooperative military action has been looked at as one possible solution to the decades of violence. The most notable of these conflicts and an example of military cooperation among League of Arab States (LAS) Member States include the ongoing Syrian and Yemeni Civil Wars. Although both conflicts involve nations from outside the LAS, much of the direct combat, especially in Yemen, is carried out by LAS coalition forces.¹ Given the nature and impact of these cooperative military ventures, it is of utmost importance that consideration is given to utilizing the bonds formed and lessons learned for the sake of not only resolving current security issues, but also for preventing and mitigating the damage of future crises.

History

The LAS has looked toward cooperative military ventures ever since its inception, but more formally beginning in 1950, when the *Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Between the States of the Arab League* was signed by seven of the original LAS Member States.² This agreement was in part a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, which saw the combined forces of Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Yemen lose to a freshly established Israel.³ The following decades would yield mixed results, especially in conflict with Israel, however the desire and ability of LAS Member States to coordinate their military actions was proven. Despite this willingness, issues still arose within the ranks of the LAS. Although Member States were lauded for their collaborative efforts in supporting the *Arab Peace Initiative*, a multilateral effort to end the Arab-Israeli Conflict, has been criticized for being unable to appropriately coordinate security policies during both the Gulf War and Iraq War.⁴⁵

In recent years, collaboration in security policies has improved. During the beginning of the Arab Spring, the general policy consensus of the LAS was one of non-intervention, even while riots and violent crack-downs took place near the LAS headquarters in Cairo.⁶ It was not until the violence and atrocities in Libya and Syria reached an unacceptable level that the LAS chose to forgo its policy of non-intervention, and instead opted for armed engagement. This took the form of establishing and supporting a no-fly-zone over Libya, and providing ground troops, air power, and material for the fight in Syria.⁷ This interventionist policy stance was also seen after the Yemeni Civil War broke out, although many point to this not only being due to the change in LAS policy, but also because of the threat to stability of the Gulf and influence held by Saudi Arabia within the organization.⁸ Regardless

¹ "Factbox: Who is fighting in Yemen's messy civil war?," Reuters, June 16, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-factbox/factbox-who-is-fighting-in-yemens-messy-civil-war-idUSKBN1JC09B>

² "Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Between the States of the Arab League, June 17, 1950," Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/arabjoin.asp

³ "The Arab Israeli War of 1948," US Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/arab-israeli-war>

⁴ Govern, Kevin, "The Arab League Joint Military Force: Countering Extremism and Political Instability," Jurist, April 1, 2015 <https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2015/04/kevin-govern-arab-league/>

⁵ Bahgat, Gawdat, "The Arab Peace Initiative: An Assessment," Middle East Policy Council, <http://mepc.org/journal/arab-peace-initiative-assessment>

⁶ Ibrahim, Raslan, "Regional Organizations and Internal Conflict: The Arab League and the Arab Spring," <http://bricspolicycenter.org/homolog/uploads/trabalhos/7110/doc/876379817.pdf>

⁷ Ibrahim, Raslan, "Regional Organizations and Internal Conflict: The Arab League and the Arab Spring," <http://bricspolicycenter.org/homolog/uploads/trabalhos/7110/doc/876379817.pdf>

⁸ Ibrahim, Raslan, "Regional Organizations and Internal Conflict: The Arab League and the Arab Spring," <http://bricspolicycenter.org/homolog/uploads/trabalhos/7110/doc/876379817.pdf>

of the motivations behind the LAS' entrance into the conflicts the organization's present and future military cooperation will be greatly affected by the events that take place during these conflicts.

Ongoing Conflicts

The most notable conflict in which the LAS finds itself directly involved in, the Syrian Civil War, has garnered the greatest global attention for a long period of time. The first move of importance carried out by the LAS to this conflict was the expelling of Syria and the Assad regime from the LAS. This action was undertaken as punishment for the continued human rights abuses carried out by the regime, even after protests were lodged by LAS Member States.⁹ This move was further bolstered when 19 ministers of LAS Member States agreed upon sanctions to be levied against Syrian leadership. These sanctions included travel bans to LAS Member States, assets being frozen, and the monitoring of transfers to and from Syria by Arab banks.¹⁰ Following a summit in March 2012, the LAS requested the Human Rights Watch be a monitor to ensure the sanctions were carried out and enforced until the Assad government ceased its human rights abuses.¹¹ Unfortunately these measures proved to be too weak to truly sway the regime, and combined with the terrifying rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), it was clear that the LAS would need to take more direct actions to see any progress made towards securing peace in Syria.

Considering its options, the LAS chose to establish a basis of support for rebel elements in Syria. At the close of a summit in March of 2013, the LAS issued a statement which "stressed the right of each state according to its wishes to offer all types of self-defense, including military, to support the resilience of the Syrian people and the Free (Syrian) Army."¹² This authorization of military support of rebel forces was further strengthened by the invitation to a seat in the LAS, formerly held by Syria and the Assad regime, to the Syrian National Coalition, an umbrella group consisting of various anti-Assad groups.¹³ Despite these measures passing, there were Member States that expressed concerns over providing so much support for rebel groups, while pushing away the Assad government. These concerns were not necessarily brought out for support of Assad, but rather due to concerns for bringing peace to Syria through more diplomatic means, which would necessitate relations with the ousted government.¹⁴ Since the decisions of 2013, the situation in Syria has shifted in such a way that beyond a select few Member States providing support and armaments to rebel groups, the LAS is largely uninvolved in the fighting.

Following the stirrings of the Arab Spring, as well as an intense escalation of a rebellious movement already underway, the Houthis of Northern Yemen, the Yemeni Civil War fully erupted. This conflict has attracted the largest amount of direct military action from LAS Member States, especially Saudi Arabia, who has been directly involved since the very beginning of the conflict.¹⁵ Soon after the conflict began, Saudi Arabia took lead over a larger coalition of several LAS Member States including Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Sudan. This coalition's members have contributed to the fight in various manners, including air strikes, and combat troops on the ground.¹⁶ The escalation of this conflict from the use of airstrikes, up to the entrance of coalition ground forces, highlight the great threats perceived by Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and their allies. The threat of the Iranian-backed Houthis amassing a great deal of territory, personnel, and military equipment necessitated a strong military response on its own but following the United States' declared unwillingness to become

⁹ "Arab League decides to suspend Syria," Aljazeera, November 11, 2011,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/11/2011111121342948333.html>

¹⁰ "Arab League: Carry Out, Monitor Syria Sanctions," Human Rights Watch, March 29, 2012,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/29/arab-league-carry-out-monitor-syria-sanctions>

¹¹ "Arab League: Carry Out, Monitor Syria Sanctions," Human Rights Watch, March 29, 2012,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/29/arab-league-carry-out-monitor-syria-sanctions>

¹² Samir, Ayman, "Arab League clears member states to arm Syria rebels," Reuters, March 6, 2013

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-league-lebanon/arab-league-clears-member-states-to-arm-syria-rebels-idUSBRE92517F20130306>

¹³ Samir, Ayman, "Arab League clears member states to arm Syria rebels," Reuters, March 6, 2013

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-league-lebanon/arab-league-clears-member-states-to-arm-syria-rebels-idUSBRE92517F20130306>

¹⁴ Samir, Ayman, "Arab League clears member states to arm Syria rebels," Reuters, March 6, 2013

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-league-lebanon/arab-league-clears-member-states-to-arm-syria-rebels-idUSBRE92517F20130306>

¹⁵ McDowell, Angus, "Why Yemen is at War," Reuters, June 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-explainer/why-yemen-is-at-war-idUSKBN1JB1TE>

¹⁶ "Key facts about the war in Yemen," Aljazeera, March 25, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/key-facts-war-yemen-160607112342462.html>

directly involved in the conflict, such a response became all the more necessary in the eyes of the Saudi-led coalition.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the war has taken a great toll on the civilian population of Yemen, and many in the international community place blame on the Arab coalition, due to the heavy aerial bombardments and continued assaults near population centers, such as the most recent attack on Yemen's largest port, Hodeidah. Although victory there would likely hasten the greater victory across Yemen, there is concerning potential for worsening Yemen's already horrific humanitarian crisis, which has left an estimated 22 million civilians in need of humanitarian aid, with 8.4 million of those being on the verge of famine.¹⁸ Although the risks to civilians in the area is concerning, members of the Arab coalition have developed a five-point humanitarian aid plan, which includes plans for aid shipments from the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to begin entering the port, once it has been seized and the shipping lanes cleared of dangers, such as mines.¹⁹ This latest battle, which is still developing is a fantastic example of the struggles LAS Member States are facing in Yemen. The issue of a worsening humanitarian crisis, coupled with the difficulty of fighting Houthi forces requires extremely high levels of cooperation between the Member States involved in the Saudi-led Arab coalition, much like the issue of maintaining peace and security in the region, once the major conflicts have subsided.

Future Cooperation

Looking to the future of LAS military cooperation, there are several issues that must be addressed. One of the most pressing is the development and rapid implementation of plans for the recovery of Syria and Yemen. A key factor for ensuring the much-needed influx of humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and reestablishment of the rule of law will be security for both the citizens of these devastated Member States, as well as those from the global community offering aid. Much like what the United States and its allies faced in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, there is a great risk for insurgent activity to slow reconstruction progress and draw nations into a frustrating quagmire of counter-guerilla operations. Preempting and mitigating this problem will require cooperation of all nations involved, especially in areas of intelligence and security policies. Outside of the warzones of Syria and Yemen, security and intelligence will be of paramount importance in the effort to maintain peace and stability in the region. Developing, coordinating, and implementing counter-terror policies in a collaborative effort that spans the LAS, will be one of the most impactful ways the LAS can affect the region with lasting, positive change.

Conclusion

Military cooperation is at the very foundation of the LAS. Throughout the organization's existence the level and effectiveness of the cooperation has varied, but the intent to maintain it has sustained well enough, that military cooperation of LAS is a strong factor in both the major conflicts currently raging in the region. In Syria, despite disagreements, the LAS has been able to both respect its Member States' sovereignty while also supporting anti-Assad forces with military aid. Several LAS Member-States are leading the fight in Yemen, however, as the fighting grows more intense and expansive, the already difficult humanitarian crisis is growing worse, and has the potential to worsen. Looking to the future of LAS military cooperation, it is clear that military cooperation will be at the forefront of any and all efforts to secure peace and security for the region.

¹⁷ "Operation Decisive Storm: Reshuffling Regional Order," Al-Jazeera, April 6, 2015,

<http://studies.aljazeera.net/mritems/Documents/2015/4/7/20154783015689734Operation%20Decisive%20Storm.pdf>

¹⁸ Ghobari, Mohammed, Mokhafesh, Mohamed, "Arab States Launch Biggest Assault of Yemen War with Attack on Main Port," Reuters, June 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/arab-states-launch-biggest-assault-of-yemen-war-with-attack-on-main-port-idUSKBN1J90BA>

¹⁹ Ghobari, Mohammed, Mokhafesh, Mohamed, "Arab States Launch Biggest Assault of Yemen War with Attack on Main Port," Reuters, June 12, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/arab-states-launch-biggest-assault-of-yemen-war-with-attack-on-main-port-idUSKBN1J90BA>