



Research Conference Paper

REFORMING THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES

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ABOUT FIKER INSTITUTE'S RESEARCH CONFERENCE: ORDER(S) IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PIVOTS & REALIGNMENTS

Fiker Institute held its Research Conference titled “Order(s) in the Middle East: Pivots & Realignment,” convening global and regional academics and experts for a full day of research-led discussion on the shifting foundations of regional order. Across five sessions, the conference examined the future of Arab multilateralism, the resilience and limits of GCC grand strategy, the Gulf’s evolving role as a rules-shaper, the consequences of strategic non-alignment amid chokepoint disruptions, and the mediation vacuum shaping crisis management across the Middle East. The Conference created a space for rigorous exchange on how regional actors are navigating realignments, institutional constraints, and new forms of geopolitical agency. This Research Conference Paper is part of a series showcasing the work of the participants of the Conference.

INTRODUCTION

The Arab region has experienced decades of political unrest, which is likely to persist; however, recent developments are indicative of the onset of a new regional order. Armed conflicts, shifting alliances, external interventions, and the increasing assertiveness of regional powers have produced a fragmented political order in which authority is dispersed among various state and non-state actors. In this context, the issue of regional agency as it relates to the establishment of collective Arab institutions to coordinate policy, manage conflict, and unify crisis response gains increasing urgency.

Existing institutions, namely the League of Arab States (LAS), seem to be the natural mechanisms through which such regional agency could be exercised. Established in 1945, the LAS is one of the oldest regional organizations in the modern international system.¹ Its Charter mandates that it strengthen relations among member states, coordinate their policies, safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and promote cooperation in areas of common concern.² Yet, despite its long-standing presence and comprehensive institutional mandate, the LAS has remained largely peripheral in responding to major regional crises. In Syria, Gaza, and Lebanon, the League has been markedly absent, shifting responsibility to external actors, individual states, and ad hoc diplomatic arrangements.³

The gap between extensive mandate and operational weakness prompts the following central question: can the LAS evolve from a symbolic forum into an effective multilateral actor capable of contributing to an emerging regional order? This Paper argues that the institutional limitations faced by the LAS are largely self-imposed. Political divisions among Arab states are undoubtedly a significant contributor to inefficacy, but cannot alone explain the persistence of institutional paralysis. Strong regional organizations do not eliminate conflict among their members: rather, they establish procedures, mechanisms, and authorities that enable the management of disagreement without blocking collective action. In line with this reasoning, I argue that the LAS has struggled precisely because its institutional design privileges sovereignty, consensus, and state control over enforcement, autonomy, and accessible regional governance.

To develop this argument, I focus on the Arab Human Rights System (AHRS), one of the LAS' few attempts to move beyond political declarations to a regional normative framework. Other regional rights protection mechanisms established by the LAS include the Arab Charter on Human Rights, the Arab Charter Committee of Human Rights, and the inoperative Arab Court of Human Rights (ACHR). However, the AHRS remains structurally weak, lacking enforcement and independent mechanisms capable of remediation. These weaknesses not only limit human rights protection: they also

reveal the LAS' broader institutional flaws.⁴

The Paper further contends that the weakness of the LAS is both a result and cause of regional fragmentation, positioning institutional reform as a prerequisite for regional agency. This does not mean transforming the LAS into a supranational body or erasing the sovereignty of member states. Instead, a more realistic objective is “functional multilateralism”^{5,6}: strengthening the institutional capacity of the LAS to monitor, coordinate, respond, and generate legitimacy while remaining an intergovernmental organization. This requires reforming the AHRS through stronger monitoring bodies, structured civil society participation, and closer alignment with international human rights standards. It also requires broader reforms to LAS decision-making, including more flexible voting procedures, a stronger Secretariat-General, and specialized crisis-response mechanisms.

THE LAS & SYMBOLIC REGIONALISM

The LAS is one of the oldest Arab regional organizations and one of the earliest in the post-World War II (WWII) international system.⁷ Its founding logic was based on cooperation, coordination, and the protection of state sovereignty rather than on collective policy- and decision-making.⁸ It is only when this institutional design is understood that the LAS' preference for symbolic regionalism can be contextualized.

The LAS has served as a diplomatic stage on which Arab unity is affirmed, Arab causes are defended, and regional crises are discussed. However, the gap between collective expression and concrete action remains persistent. The absence of an enforcement mechanism constitutes an important weakness in the organization's institutional design, as the Charter repeatedly privileges the sovereignty of member states over the organization's autonomy.⁹ Examples include Article V, which gives the Council of the LAS a role in mediation, but only under limited conditions and with important exceptions regarding independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.¹⁰ Even with these limitations in place, member states have relied on informal or external means of mediation and conflict resolution, hindering the League's capacity to settle disputes systemically and collectively.¹¹

The introduction of the unanimity rule under Article VII of the Charter¹² is the primary driver of this design failure. The unanimity rule is Westphalian in its approach, being characterized by the centralization of state sovereignty to all policy processes and the focus on nation-state independence from external interference. This has consistently created a deadlock in the League's decision-making and conflict resolution processes. For instance, the Arab League failed to produce a unanimous and unified stance on the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.¹³ Even when decisions are binding, each

state is responsible for enforcement within its own borders in accordance with its own domestic law.¹⁴ This means that the League's collective will is structurally dependent on the consent of its members.

In Syria, Gaza, and Lebanon, the League has often been present through meetings, statements, and diplomatic positioning.¹⁵ In Syria, its actions in response to the events of 2011, including suspension and blaming, demonstrated that it could respond politically to a major regional crisis. Indeed, the LAS' suspension of Syria's membership and its imposition of political and economic sanctions on the country sent a clear message. However, the limits of the League's institutional capacity to sustain an effective mediation or accountability framework were also exposed.¹⁶ In Gaza, the League has historically provided an important platform for Arab positions on Palestine, but its role has remained constrained when compared to the influence of individual states, external powers, and international organizations.¹⁷

While inter-state political divisions and competition hinder the efficacy of the Arab League's mandate, the LAS' lack of institutional capacity to handle these disagreements becomes the deeper issue. To be more functional, such a regional organization should establish procedures, mechanisms, and authorities that enable disagreements to be managed effectively, so as not to hinder collective progress. This can be achieved through the creation and standardization of a mediation approach, possibly through the creation of a specialized mediation unit. The struggle to produce binding decisions appears in the League's human rights architecture as well as in its political and security fields. The AHRS provides a useful case study of such institutional paralysis, allowing an assessment of the LAS' ability to move beyond symbolic commitment to building effective mechanisms capable of monitoring, enforcing, and legitimizing regional norms.

THE AHRS AS A DIAGNOSTIC CASE

Comparative scholarship on regional human rights systems demonstrates that their effectiveness depends primarily on the institutional architecture created to implement them.¹⁸ Against these comparative benchmarks, the AHRS serves not simply as a human rights regime but as an indicator of the broader institutional capacity of the LAS to convert regional commitments into effective governance.

The existence of the AHRS signals that the LAS has attempted to move beyond purely political coordination and to develop a regional normative framework. The Arab Charter on Human Rights, adopted in its revised form in 2004 and entering into force in 2008, marked an important moment in the institutionalization of human rights at the regional level in the Arab region. The Charter reflects an acknowledgment that the Arab

regional order cannot be built solely on sovereignty, security, and inter-governmental diplomacy, but must also address the protection of individuals and communities.¹⁹

However, the Charter also reveals the limits of normative development without institutional enforcement. While the Charter is a significant step in the right direction and is empowered to issue declarations about rights, declarations alone do not ensure protection. This limitation on enforceability is clearest in the role of the Arab Charter Committee of Human Rights, which was established under the Arab Charter to examine reports submitted by member states on the implementation of the Charter's obligations. Its mandate allows it to review state practices, issue comments, and make observations and recommendations.²⁰ Yet the Committee remains primarily a monitoring body rather than an enforcement mechanism.²¹ Therefore, it can identify concerns but cannot enforce solutions, rendering it non-functional and weakening the institutional pathway from violation to remedy.²²

If it were an operational and effective judicial mechanism, the ACHR would address part of this enforcement gap. The Court has not entered into force because while its Statute was adopted in 2014, it has yet to receive the required number of ratifications.²³ The fragility of the LAS' human rights architecture is exemplified by the fact that its central judicial mechanism remains largely aspirational.

The AHRS, therefore, matters beyond the field of human rights; it indicates that Arab multilateralism cannot effectively translate to functional authority. If the LAS cannot build credible rights-protection mechanisms, it cannot easily claim broader normative or political authority in the region. Such institutions are integral to regional order, helping regional organizations build legitimacy, manage disputes, and define state-society relationships. The weakness of the AHRS, therefore, can help explain why the LAS remains limited as a governance actor and why reforming legal mechanisms is central to any broader project to transform the League itself.

FROM INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS TO GEOPOLITICAL FRAGMENTATION

The institutional weakness of the LAS also has geopolitical consequences.²⁴ When a regional inter-governmental organization lacks credible mechanisms for mediation, monitoring, and enforcement, it cannot readily serve as the central platform for managing regional crises and resolving inter- and intra-state disputes.²⁵ This weakness creates governance vacuums that external actors step into, including international organizations, individual regional states, and informal diplomatic coalitions.²⁶ In this sense, the LAS' institutional limitations do not merely reflect the fragmentation of the Arab world, they also help reproduce it by threatening regional independence and unity.

One major consequence is the externalization of mediation. In principle, the LAS should be the natural institutional forum for addressing crises among Arab states and within the Arab region.²⁷ Its Charter prohibits the use of force between member states, gives the Council a mediation role in disputes that may lead to war, and allows the Council to consider aggression or threats of aggression against member states. Yet these provisions are limited by the same sovereignty-centered design discussed earlier; the Council's capacity depends on state consent, unanimity in sensitive cases, and the implementation of decisions through domestic legal systems.²⁸ As a result, the LAS is often present in the political language of crisis response, but absent from the decisive mechanisms that shape outcomes.

The point is not that external actors should never participate in mediation; many regional crises require international cooperation, especially when conflicts involve cross-border interests, humanitarian emergencies, or violations of international law. The problem is that the weakness of Arab regional institutions allows external involvement to become a substitute rather than a complement, weakening the possibility of an autonomous Arab regional order. Additionally, it undermines the benefits of a multi-lateral framework and replaces the concepts of diversity, regionalism, and assistance with foreign involvement and intervention.

A second consequence is the rise of ad hoc state-led regionalism. In the absence of strong collective mechanisms, individual Arab states increasingly act as mediators.²⁹ Sometimes, these initiatives may produce practical results more quickly than multilateral procedures, mobilizing financial resources, diplomatic access, and political leverage that the LAS itself lacks. However, ad hoc state-led initiatives do not necessarily build collective regional governance: they may solve immediate problems while leaving the institutional weakness of the LAS unimproved.

REFORMING THE LAS: FROM NORMATIVE COMMITMENT TO REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The call to reform the LAS should not be framed as a call for idealistic supranationalism. The aim is not to transform the League into a European Union-style institution or to erase the sovereignty of member states, especially given the major differences in their identity, culture, economies, and the existing conflicts among them. A more realistic objective is functional multilateralism, which would require providing the LAS with sufficient institutional, legal, financial, and political capacity to monitor, coordinate, respond, and gain legitimacy as an intergovernmental organization.³⁰ This approach acknowledges that sovereignty will persist as a defining factor in Arab regional politics; however, it contends that sovereignty should not inhibit the development of credible

mechanisms for rights protection, crisis response, and collective action—provided that Arab countries choose to collaborate and are willing to cede some aspects of their sovereignty for the collective benefit of Arab states.

The first area of reform can be the AHRS, which is underdeveloped yet central. This would not only strengthen rights protection but it would also increase the legitimacy of the LAS by making regional institutions visible and accessible to the people they are meant to serve. The systemization of the Court remains a challenging area of reform, especially in regard to its leadership and location. Therefore, it is important that a rotational approach be adopted, which would allow equal representation of Arab states and mitigate competition. The Arab Charter Committee of Human Rights should be strengthened by making its reporting more transparent, public, and participatory. It should include reports from civil society, human rights groups, experts, and communities which would lead to clearer conclusions and follow-up mechanisms. Members should be chosen transparently, prioritizing expertise, independence, gender balance, and integrity. The Committee should function as an expert body, not a diplomatic one, to build legal understanding and regional trust.

Secondly, the LAS must reform its decision-making procedures. The Charter's reliance on unanimity has contributed to institutional paralysis in sensitive situations.³¹ Reform does not require abolishing consensus in all matters, but it should introduce more flexible voting procedures for selected areas. Emergency procedures could be created for situations involving mass violence, humanitarian access, displacement, or other threats to regional peace. Opt-in mechanisms could allow groups of willing states to act within a LAS framework rather than outside it when unanimity is unachievable.³² This would preserve state sovereignty while preventing disagreement from blocking all regional action.

Thirdly, the role of the Secretariat-General should also be strengthened. A regional organization cannot function effectively if its permanent organs lack policy-making capacity, technical expertise, and initiative. The Secretariat-General should also host specialized units on mediation, humanitarian coordination, protection of civilians, and post-conflict reconstruction. These units would not replace political decision-making by member states, but would provide the technical infrastructure needed to enable collective action.

The fourth area, a specialized crisis-response mechanism, is particularly necessary.³³ The LAS should develop a standing mediation and early-warning unit capable of monitoring tensions, identifying risks, and supporting preventive diplomacy. It should also establish a humanitarian access coordination mechanism to work with member states, UN agencies, and local actors during armed conflicts and disasters.

A protection-of-civilians mechanism could support documentation, recommendations, and regional standards in situations of mass violence. A post-conflict reconstruction platform could coordinate Arab financial, legal, and institutional support to strengthen collective regional governance rather than competing national initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The persistent gap between the Arab League's regional ambitions and its practical influence is not merely the product of political fragmentation: it is embedded in the organization's institutional design. The marginality of the LAS in major regional crises cannot be solely explained by political disagreement between Arab states. While political divisions certainly matter, the deeper problems are institutional. From its founding, the LAS was structured as a forum for coordination among sovereign states rather than as an organization capable of exercising independent regional authority. Its emphasis on sovereignty, consensus, limited enforcement, and state-controlled implementation has allowed it to articulate common Arab positions, but has often prevented it from transforming those positions into coordinated and binding regional action.

If the Arab region is to move beyond reactive diplomacy towards effective multilateralism, it requires regional institutions capable of generating legitimacy, coordinating collective action, and sustaining political commitments over time. The LAS can contribute meaningfully to such an order only by moving beyond symbolic regionalism and investing in a stronger institutional infrastructure for rights protection, accountability, mediation, and crisis response.

About the Author



Fadi Hachem is an international human rights lawyer and university lecturer in International Law and Human Rights. He is currently a PhD researcher at Université Catholique de Louvain and has published several studies on law and human rights in the Arab World. His research interests include human rights protection and vulnerable groups. Last year, he joined the International Article 18 Alliance as a member of its council of experts.

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