



MENA REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS IN PEACEMAKING AND PEACEBUILDING

THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES,
GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL
AND ORGANISATION OF
ISLAMIC COOPERATION

Courtney Freer

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MENA Regional Organisations in Peacemaking and Peacebuilding: The League of Arab States, Gulf Cooperation Council and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

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Abstract

This report, compiled through desk research and interviews with academics and policymakers, serves to highlight primary assets and challenges of three regional organisations in the MENA peacemaking/peacebuilding space: the League of Arab States, Gulf Cooperation Council and Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. It introduces the primary goals of each organisation before illustrating the assets and pitfalls of each through the use of concrete case studies of their involvement in regional conflicts. The report seeks to interrogate the efficacy of three regional organisations in peacemaking/peacebuilding, ways in which their involvement in this sector differs from that of other regional or extra-regional bodies, the unique challenges facing the MENA region, and the best way for the FCDO to engage, either with these bodies or others, to enhance progress towards peace in a region that houses several ongoing political conflicts.



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Key Findings

The following key characteristics feature in the peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts of MENA regional bodies (the League of Arab States, or LAS, Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, or OIC), which are elaborated on below.

- Overall, regional organisations in MENA are fractured, with the presence of sub-regional organisations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) further enhancing divisions and competition among these states. The presence of multiple regional and extra-regional venues (the UN or OIC) for conflict resolution also often leads states to ‘shop’ for a venue in conflict situations, delaying resolution.
- Bilateralism continues to be the primary mode of peacemaking/peacebuilding in MENA, due to internal divisions, structural shortcomings of regional organisations, and interstate competition to achieve international recognition for foreign policy accomplishments. Bilateral ties, as well as bilateral competition, therefore increasingly define how conflicts proceed in the MENA region. This dynamic, in turn, produces country leaders in the region, often at the expense of less powerful – and usually less wealthy – states. Indeed, in recent years, we have seen GCC states taking an increasing interest and role in peacemaking/peacebuilding largely due to their ability to finance such projects, while former regional leaders such as Egypt and Syria increasingly attach themselves to one of the ascendant regional powers.
- Due to the lack of regional unity, for reasons of geopolitical competition as well as ideological differences, there is substantial space for extra-regional actors like Russia and the US to enter conflicts in MENA, with Syria a prime example of this practice. With the perception of American and British withdrawal from the region, this trend is likely to accelerate, with new actors like Russia (in the peacebuilding sphere) and China (in the realm of investment) becoming increasingly influential.

Recommendations

- The FCDO should encourage the involvement of civil society organisations in the peacemaking/peacebuilding spaces. The MENA region is unique in the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes, which has made popular involvement in foreign policy or even humanitarian issues difficult. By granting more agency to citizens, however, it is possible that more long-termist and popular progress is made in peacemaking/peacebuilding.
- The FCDO should encourage MENA regional institutions to begin cooperating on apolitical, humanitarian issues in ongoing conflict zones like Syria and Yemen as a means of building trust and helping to alleviate poor conditions in the region. Cooperation on more logistical issues can potentially, in turn, lead to greater willingness to work together on longer term issues or conflicts.
- The FCDO should discourage the involvement of extra-regional states in MENA-specific conflicts, as the internationalisation of these conflicts often leads to their stagnation as well as to the entrenchment of proxy conflicts. If extra-regional powers want to become involved in MENA conflicts, their participation should be encouraged through channels of international organisations such as the United Nations, rather than as unilateral missions that often encourage short-term competition rather than fostering long-term peace.

Introduction

This report serves to highlight primary assets and challenges of three regional MENA organisations in the peacemaking/peacebuilding space: the LAS, GCC and OIC. It introduces the primary goals of each organisation broadly before illustrating their assets and pitfalls through the use of concrete case studies of their involvement in regional conflicts.

The report was compiled through substantial desk research and interviews with fellow academics and policymakers, both in the Middle East and United States. The use of case studies will concretise the theoretical challenges facing each of the organisations under study. In general, the report seeks to interrogate the efficacy of three regional organisations in peacemaking/peacebuilding, ways in which their involvement in this sector differs from that of other regional or extra-regional bodies, the unique challenges facing the MENA region, and the best way for the FCDO to engage, either with these bodies or others, to enhance progress towards peace in a region that is home to several ongoing political conflicts.

The League of Arab States

The League of Arab States (LAS) was created in March 1945 by Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Transjordan. In the aftermath of World War II, these states bounded together as a means to provide mutual protection. Interestingly, unlike other regional organisations based solely on geographical proximity, the League of Arab States was formed on the basis of shared culture, ethnicity and language (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 180) and as a result has historically omitted some of its closest geographical neighbours in the region, such as Iran, Israel and Turkey. Because it formed due to shared culture and background, the LAS should theoretically enjoy more easily coordinated foreign policies and thus be more effectively engaged in the peacemaking/peacebuilding sectors than it is.

Indeed, members of the LAS, which itself was founded on the eve of the establishment of the Israeli state in May 1948, have been united also in their shared concern about the threat of the expansion of Israel and Israeli power, in addition to concerns about Western assistance in Israel's pursuit of greater power in the region (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 180). The LAS's first major failure, however, took place when the organisation could not agree on granting membership to the League for the newly created Palestinian government in Gaza and failed to take a unified stance in the ensuing Arab-Israeli war in 1948–9, which 'partially downsized [...] expectations and inaugurated a gradual process of formal and informal adaptation of the League's legal features and internal procedures' (Pinfari, 2009, p. 4). Rather than becoming a forum for the protection of Palestinian sovereignty, then, the LAS demonstrated from the outset its hesitation to take action in peacemaking/peacebuilding without unanimous member agreement.

Indeed, the primary engine behind less effective cooperation through the LAS has been the concern about the need to preserve state sovereignty above all else; arguably, this issue is more fragile for non-democratic states which lack popular legitimacy at home

that more participatory democracies enjoy. Ultimately, then, ‘while Arab leaders needed to create some regional association in order to satisfy the aspirations of some domestic constituencies, they also feared that such an association would leave them vulnerable to other Arab leaders and compromise their own political survival’ (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 189). These leaders therefore ensured that the League would be limited in its ability to intervene in issues of domestic politics or to violate national sovereignty. Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, recognising the possibility that a transnational movement like Arab nationalism could lead to violations of national sovereignty, insisted on a provision for the ‘respect for the independence and sovereignty of states’ (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 191). So loose was the Charter in its nebulous bond of unity that King Abdullah of Transjordan characterised the LAS in 1948 as ‘a sack in which seven heads have been thrust’ (Barnett and Solingen, 2009).

Initially, the LAS had three broadly conceived goals: ‘to strengthen relationships between member states; to coordinate their policies to further cooperation and maintain their independence and sovereignty; and to promote the general welfare and interests of the Arab states’ (Masters and Sergie, 2020). Areas for cooperation were (and have continued to be) related to technical areas such as health, economic and trade ties, and social and cultural affairs, rather than anything political which could be construed as a challenge to national sovereignty (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 191). In Macdonald’s words, ‘the primary purpose of the League is to foster non-political activities and only incidentally to enter the political arena’ (Macdonald, 1965, p. 43). Because the League cannot by charter become involved in any activity that could be considered as threatening national sovereignty, it has had very limited involvement in peacemaking/peacebuilding. It was therefore largely imagined as an institution meant to preserve the political status quo rather than challenge it, thus hindering its ability to become involved in regional or domestic conflicts (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 192).

The LAS charter has been the focus of many studies concerning the League’s inefficacy in peacemaking/peacebuilding, since it from the start has included provisions to ensure the protection of nation-state sovereignty. Certainly, the charter

stipulated that only those countries approving its resolutions are bound by them. This lack of conditionality regarding commitment to common action has been at the heart of the League’s ineffectiveness. Following the failure of the Arab states in their war with Israel in 1948, LAS members approved two agreements for common defence and economic cooperation. But these were never properly implemented, which has led to weakening joint Arab action over the years (Al-Qassab, 2020).

This weakening has taken place despite the fact that the political reality of popular Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s ‘oriented Arab states toward each other’ (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 184). Still, domestic political realities ultimately drove the decision-making of national leaders (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 184). As Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen explain, ‘[l]eaders committed to their own domestic political requirements got the weak institutions they wanted: just enough to demonstrate their commitment

to Arabism but not so much as to allow Arabism to threaten their individual sovereignties, domestic political alliances, and power base' (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 184–5). Sustained concern about the need to preserve national sovereignty, especially after the failed experiment of the United Arab Republic in 1963, drove decision-making more than a normative commitment to Arabism, although Arabism and the LAS remained useful rhetorical tools.

Member states have indicated that aims include increased trade and commerce since they share similar production patterns, yet even their economic similarities have ultimately undermined effective commercial integration (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 180). What accounts for the overall inaction or failure of the LAS, then, is arguably not linked to member states themselves but to the institution and the way in which it has been arranged: 'The Arab League was designed to fail as a supranational entity, and in that sense it reflects the triumph of domestic regimes with little interest in developing robust regime institutions' (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 182). Paul Aarts agrees that, because regime survival is privileged above all else, little coordinated action can take place:

The Middle East is the region of 'realist thinking' *par excellence*. Collective political structures have mostly taken the form of 'regional hegemonism' (or 'hegemonic regionalism'), while economic integration has hardly moved beyond the stage of rhetoric. Although the prospect of Arab unity tantalises all Arabs to some degree, a stark contrast between this idea and the poor results of the many ostensible efforts in that direction remains a particular trait of the Arab world today (Aarts, 1999, p. 911).

Institutionally, the LAS, headquartered in Cairo, works primarily through the Arab League Council and Secretariat. The Council, in which each of the 22 member states has a seat, is charged with conflict mediation for members and non-members alike, managing relations with various United Nations bodies, and facilitating coordination on foreign policy and defence issues of common interest to member states (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 192). The Council, which meets twice a year and in emergency sessions, votes before taking action, with Article 7 of the LAS's charter specifying, as Barnett and Solingen explain, that 'all substantive matters related to political or security issues, to become binding, require unanimity; majority decisions are binding only on those members that vote for them. The effect of this voting rule was to give each Arab state virtual veto power over any proposed policy and to drive the Arab League to the lowest common denominator on matters of Arab unity' (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 192).

As a result, the League has remained a powerful institution representing Arab unity on paper, but on the ground has been unable to do very little of political importance or to enhance peacemaking or peacebuilding. In Macdonald's words, 'the unanimity rule of the League Council serves as a brake on the inherent tendency of the organization either to evolve into a unitary state or to collapse completely' (Macdonald, 1965, p. 58). As a result, there has been much more style than substance when it comes to the LAS's involvement in peacemaking and peacebuilding: while the League has been invoked in regional crises, it is rarely able to take meaningful action due to the unanimity rule that was intended to preserve the power of ruling elites.

The Permanent Secretariat, comprising the Secretary-General, Assistant Secretaries and a number of officials, is the other main decision-making body in the LAS, appointed by the Council through a two-thirds vote among members. The position of Secretary-General was exclusively held by Egyptian nationals until 1979 and has become increasingly politically important, although the power of the office is limited to making statements and receiving documentation and requests from members, rather than acting on their behalf. The LAS also contains a variety of internal organisations, such as the Arab Development Bank, Economic and Social Council, Arab Postal Union, Arab Union for Communications, a union of Arab radio stations, ALESCO, the Arab Labour Organisation and Arab Labour Bureau, Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and Arab Monetary Fund, although it is unclear how active each of these sub-organisations are (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 213–14). Between 25 to 30 percent of the LAS's budget has historically gone to 'information' – reflecting the need to be seen above all else (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 213–14).

Even when the LAS has taken action through the passage of resolutions, it has had a limited effect. By the 1980s, according to Barnett and Solingen, the LAS had passed over 4,000 resolutions, but over 80 percent were never implemented, reflecting in their words 'the endeavor to make the Arab League "be seen but not heard"' (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 213–14).

In terms of peacemaking institutions within the League itself, Article 5 of the Charter specifies that '[a]ny resort to force in order to resolve disputes between two or more member-states of the League is prohibited' (LAS, 1945). In the event of a conflict between two member states, the same article specifies that only the states involved in the conflict can participate in Council deliberations and that decisions of arbitration and mediation require a majority vote.

Ibrahim Awad found that the LAS succeeded in resolving six of the 77 inter-Arab conflicts between 1945 and 1981, with the League tending to abstain from involvement in conflicts involving members of competing regional blocs (Awad, 1994, pp. 147–60). Marco Pinfari extended this study in a 2009 paper, finding that the League intervened in minor wars, succeeding in gaining at least partial settlement in eight out of 20 recorded border wars and political crises, yet the LAS has historically been hesitant to mediate in inter-state conflicts when one or more warring parties is not a member (Pinfari, 2009, p. 2). Pinfari finds that the LAS 'tends to be more effective in managing minor disputes between its "core" membership (the countries that had joined the League since the 1940s, especially Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq) and that, in contrast with the expectation that regional organizations act as *first* port of call for regional disputes, other organizations (especially the United Nations) are often called upon immediately by the parties involved and the involvement of the League as an active mediator normally *follows* the failure of these other bodies in dealing with a dispute' (Pinfari, 2016). Due to the proliferation of regional and subregional bodies, in addition to UN councils, then, Arab states often choose to look elsewhere for assistance in peacemaking/peacebuilding.

Further, Mark Zacher found in 1979 that the Arab League had a 12 percent success rate in resolving regional conflicts, compared to 19 percent for the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), 37 percent for the Organisation of American States (OAS) and 9 percent for the UN (Zacher, 1979, p. 161).

Where the League has been successful in uniting members behind common causes, it has mostly been in apolitical issues – for example, the founding of the Arab Organisation for Petroleum Exporting Countries (AOPEC) in 1968 and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALECSO) in 1970. Another reason for the lack of progress in conflict resolution is the general lack of trust regionally. As Aarts explains, '[m]utual distrust is high, both between regimes and their citizens and between regimes themselves. As long as the governments of most of the Arab states maintain themselves in the way to which they have been accustomed, "regionalism" will remain a largely symbolic issue' (Aarts, 1999, p. 920).

Barnett and Solingen, as well as Aarts, cite Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 as a turning point in demonstrating the lack of unity and trust among Arab states after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait: the fact that one member state's invasion of another did not provoke a regional reaction is indicative of its inability to take action, even rhetorically, in the peacemaking/peacebuilding sphere due to internal divisions and suspicions. Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa even recognised the weakness of the organisation after the war, stating: 'Arab states wanted the war and I do not care if the Arab League remains or goes. I excuse the strong bitterness in Kuwait, but I believe they should not help invade Iraq' (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 215–16). Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahayan apparently had offered a deal to Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein: Hussein would resign to prevent war in Kuwait, an arrangement to which Hussein allegedly was receptive as long as the LAS would honour the offer (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 215–16). Ultimately, however, though the offer was circulated among League members, it was never officially debated, and a US-led coalition ultimately liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 215–16).

Another issue that has contributed to lack of unity in the LAS since the Camp David Accords in 1979, and exacerbated by the 2020 Abraham Accords, is these states' increasingly disparate stances on Israel. Where unity against Israel was once a rallying cry for Arab states, today it has become a divisive topic. Notably, Egypt was expelled from the LAS after Camp David, to be reinstated only one decade later. After Jordan signed a similar peace deal with Israel in 1994, however, it was not ostracised by the LAS – perhaps because Egypt had already had its membership restored and set a precedent. Similarly, in 2020, the LAS chose not to condemn the Abraham Accords or member states who were party to them, although such a measure was proposed by the Palestinian delegation and supported by some member states. This inaction led the State of Palestine to relinquish chairmanship of the current round of meetings in symbolic protest – a move just short of withdrawing membership that was followed in solidarity by Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Qatar and Comoros (Jahshan, 2020).

The official League stance on Israel-Palestine, the most important conflict in the region, notably contradicts that of the Arab Peace Initiative, although the Arab League formally endorsed it in 2002, 2007 and 2017 as its preferred strategy towards resolving the conflict. The Arab Peace Initiative offers a means for normalisation between Arab League member states and Israel on the condition that Israel withdraws from the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and Lebanon, resolves the refugee problem through UN Resolution 194, and recognises an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Nonetheless, the LAS has not taken concrete action towards implementation of the Initiative and instead has limited its support to rhetoric, while remaining silent on the Abraham Accords. Notably, the LAS has also maintained an official boycott of Israeli goods and companies since 1948, although there is no enforcement mechanism and a growing number of member states have increased trade ties with Israel after normalisation (Masters and Sergie, 2020).

The Arab League issued the Arab Charter for Human Rights in 1994, which may have appeared to be an important step towards unity but has not inspired any action. Indeed, the document includes an annex on Palestine in 2008, confirming Palestinian independence and stating that ‘even though the outward signs of this independence have remained veiled as a result of force majeure’, Palestine should participate in the LAS as an equal member (LAS, 1945). Ultimately, despite the composition of a document, ‘[a]bstaining from intervention on account of human rights violations was among the few truly consensual principles guiding Arab League members, reflecting the common rejection of democratic institutions by most of its leaders. The Arab Charter for Human Rights issued by the Arab League in 1994 has not been endorsed by a single Arab country’ (Barnett and Solingen, 2009, p. 217). Even where the LAS has endorsed specific documents meant to guide its actions, then, it has largely failed to translate rhetoric into policy, potentially for fear of the effect of such action on domestic political legitimacy and stability.

Overall, Mehran Kamrava’s assessment of the LAS’s involvement in peacemaking/peace-building seems apt: ‘The Arab League has also been a persistent, if not wholly successful, actor in regional conflict resolution initiatives’ (Kamrava, 2011, p. 541). The below example of the LAS’s sporadic and disjointed approach to the Syrian Civil War since 2011 helps to showcase this fact and suggests that in the future bilateralism, rather than regionalism or multilateralism, will be on the rise in the Middle East – particularly due to the differences in subregions and existence of subregional organisations like the GCC, also discussed below (Aarts, 1999, p. 921). As Pinfari explains, ‘what we see is a persistent pattern of non-intervention in almost all major civil wars, which seems to reflect a shared interest by most Arab League members to reassert the *uti possidetis* rule and the inviolability of their boundaries from external interference’ (Pinfari, 2009, p. 11).

Case Study: The Syrian Civil War

At the start of violence against pro-democracy protesters in Syria in March 2011, the LAS became involved in trying to seek a solution. In November 2011, the regime of Bashar al-Asad approved an Arab League plan to send in monitors, while prohibiting the Syrian military from deploying tanks and soldiers against peaceful protesters (Macaron, 2020). When it became clear within two weeks in November 2011 that the regime was violating this agreement, however, the Arab League suspended Syria's membership to the organisation and imposed political and economic sanctions on the Asad regime; member states were asked to withdraw their ambassadors from Damascus – a vote in which Lebanon and Yemen declined and in which Iraq abstained (Ziadeh, 2020). Nonetheless, the LAS's summit held at the end of November 2011 was the first to impose sanctions against a member, albeit a suspended one (T.M., 2014).

In December 2011, the Syrian government signed a second peace plan put together by the LAS: this plan required the withdrawal of both the Syrian military and rebel forces from the streets, the release of political prisoners, the permission of Arab League monitors to enter the country, and the start of a political dialogue between the Asad regime and opposition. On 26 December, 50 Arab League monitors began arriving in Syria, yet reported the continued use of violence against protesters by the regime.

At the end of January 2012, the LAS resolved to extend the mission after its expiration on 19 January, with member states divided about the mission's accomplishments (Chulov, 2012). Despite division about the mission, LAS ministers released a joint statement demanding that Asad relinquish power and take steps towards the formation of a national unity government (Chulov, 2012). The Saudi government on 22 January, however, announced that it would no longer take part in the mission, since, in the words of then Foreign Minister Prince Saudi al-Faisal, 'the Syrian government did not execute any of the elements of the Arab resolution plan'; he called for 'all possible pressure' to be placed on Syria to accede to the LAS's peace plan (Chulov, 2012). Additionally, some 22 LAS monitors left the mission for ethical reasons, as they believed that their presence emboldened protesters who were in turn attacked by government forces (Chulov, 2012). On 28 January, amidst worsening violence, the LAS suspended its monitoring mission (BBC, 2012).

There had been initial consensus that Syria was an Arab issue and should be dealt with by the Arab states themselves, yet worsening violence led to a desire for global involvement. Indeed, after the withdrawal of the LAS mission, a joint LAS-UN mission took over, with former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed Joint Special Envoy to Syria in February 2012. The LAS also developed a new peace plan adopted as a UNSC statement and accepted by Asad, which led to a brief ceasefire in April (T.M., 2014). Qatari Amir Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani called for LAS-UN peacekeeping forces to enter Syria to contain violence on the ground, while Saudi Arabia demanded arming the opposition; meanwhile, other countries and Annan himself were opposed to further militarisation (T.M., 2014). This disagreement proved deadly to unified LAS efforts.

In the midst of this disagreement, Qatar and Saudi Arabia began arming groups on their own to challenge the Asad regime on the ground (AbuKhalil, 2018). Russia and Iran also entered the fight, but to aid the Asad regime, leading to further polarisation and disa-

greement among the LAS. Indeed, '[a]s the Syrian regime began to expand its territorial control over the country, Arab governments had to choose between two prevailing policies: a Russian position encouraging and endorsing engagement with Damascus and an American stance calling for boycotting the Syrian regime and imposing sanctions on it' (Macaron, 2020). Excluding Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, all LAS members enacted some form of sanctions on dealing with the Central Bank of Syria, largely due to fears of being sanctioned in turn by Western countries (Schenker, 2021). Beyond this move and the initial observer mission, though, the LAS did little to move towards peacemaking/peacebuilding.

Annan himself blamed 'internal lack of unity' and 'destructive "external" competition' for his resignation as Special Envoy in August 2012 (Macaron, 2020). The UN did sponsor a Geneva process to begin negotiations, but January's Geneva-II talks in 2014, based on the June 2012 Geneva Communique, ended early with no agreement. Several rounds of talks have also taken place with rebel forces in Astana to complement the Geneva process, but none has been successful, and the Asad regime is increasingly less likely to become involved in such negotiations as it continues to regain authority on the ground in Syria.

Reflecting developments in recent years, several members of the LAS have advocated for Syria to be reinstated as a full member after its suspension. In 2018, Saudi Arabia led and Russia encouraged the reinstatement of the Asad regime's membership to the League, but the American Trump administration discouraged Arab states from becoming involved and increased sanctions on the Syrian regime, in addition to exerting pressure against the involvement of Russia and Iran in Syria (Macaron, 2020). The Arab states have each taken their own stances: the UAE reopened an embassy in Damascus in 2018, with Bahrain following suit shortly after (Macaron, 2020). In 2019, Saudi Arabia took an opposite position as it faced global repercussions after the murder of Jamal Khashoggi – a meeting between Saudi State Minister for Arab Gulf Affairs Thamer al-Sabhan in eastern Syria in June 2019 and local tribal leaders ended with the minister offering support for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (Macaron, 2020). There were, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, direct flights between Syria and Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, showing the move towards normalisation.

The Arab League in 2019 criticised the involvement of Turkey and Iran in Syria: 'The Arab League is prepared to interfere, but the question is whether there is willingness on the part of other parties for the League to play a role in the Syrian file' (Abu Husain, 2019). But League members have remained at odds when it comes to reinstating Syrian membership in the body itself. A media advisor to Bashar al-Asad explained in 2022 that 'Damascus will return to the Arab League when they [the Arab League] reconsider the mistake that has happened' (Maki, 2022). Saudi Arabia remains unlikely to allow readmission of Syria, yet in November 2021, Asad's Chief of General Intelligence attended the Arab Intelligence Forum in Cairo and was pictured there with his Saudi counterpart who reportedly had travelled to Damascus earlier in 2021, so change could be on the horizon, depending largely on bilateral, rather than multilateral, considerations (Maki, 2022).

Failure to take action or find compromise early on has plagued LAS's involvement in the Syrian civil war. But the UN process has been no more successful, given that external powers have entrenched interests within Syria, making resolution of the conflict increasingly difficult.

The Gulf Cooperation Council

The GCC formed in 1981 due to collective concern among Gulf monarchs about the prospects for a militaristic and expansionist Iran after the 1979 Revolution, particularly against the backdrop of the ongoing Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). Despite having been formed in response to concerns about conflicts, however, the body has had limited success in the realm of peacemaking/peacebuilding. As Gertjan Hoetjes explains:

‘[t]he regionalisation that occurred in 1981 was fostered by a shared belief among the six ruling families that they could not face these challenges alone as their regime security was interdependent. This perception of interdependence was nurtured by common features in terms of ethnicity, political structure (dynastic monarchy), political economy (rentier economy), culture (similarities in dress codes) and history (the pre-eminence of pearl hunting and desert life in the pre-oil era)’ (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 154).

Like the LAS, then, the GCC was established on the basis of shared characteristics, rather than merely on geographical proximity, and indeed geographically proximate states like Iraq and Yemen have notably remained excluded from the Council. Indeed, ‘[c]ommon strategic and ideological worries, rather than a long-term project of unification, brought the oil-rich dynastic kingdoms of the Gulf together in the mid-1970s, when they began fearing the regional ambitions of Iran and Iraq’ (Pinfari, 2016).

Quite tellingly, the GCC Charter, despite the body’s foundation on the basis of security concerns, ‘refers to “economic and financial affairs” as the first area of cooperation but fails to mention coordination of security, defence and foreign policies’ (Pinfari, 2009, p. 5). Article 10 of the Charter grants the Supreme Council the potential to establish a Commission for the Settlement of Disputes (without defining ‘dispute’) when necessary, which has never been used in practice, though it is intended to address intra-GCC conflicts (Pinfari, 2009, p. 5). In 1981, a Unified Economic Agreement solidified the states’ intention to eventually establish a common market. In May of that year, a Military Committee was established within the GCC Secretariat which helped to organise joint military exercises in 1983 and 1984 and to establish the shared military, the 2,500-strong Peninsula Shield, in 1985 (Pinfari, 2009, p. 5). In 1982, an Internal Security Agreement was discussed, but was only passed thirty years later with the onset of the Arab Spring.

The Supreme Council is the GCC’s most important governing body, as it comprises the heads of state of the six constituent members. The council meets once every year to set the organisation’s priorities. In Matteo Legrenzi’s words, this council has ‘political, judicial and legislative control over all decisions taken by the organization’ (Legrenzi, 2015, p. 37–8). Like the Arab League, the GCC also houses a Ministerial Council whose members are ministers of foreign affairs from member states, as well as a Secretary-General, though GCC secretary-generals are elected from different member states on a rotating basis (Pinfari, 2016).

In addition to these primary organs of the GCC, a number of technical committees meet more regularly, particularly to enhance economic ties. Further, the Secretariat-General:

‘prepares studies and assists member states in the implementation of the resolutions and recommendations of the Supreme Council and Ministerial Councils. Its role has remained constrained due to the dominance of the norm of sovereignty in the GCC as a result of the fear of the ruling families to cede sovereignty. This has prevented the organisation from making binding decisions and creates inconsistency in formulating policy, impeding the ability of the organisation to contribute to peacebuilding in the region’ (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 155).

Much like the Arab League, then, fears about incursions into national sovereignty have constrained the degree to which joint action is possible.

Despite these institutional restraints, the GCC did in the 1980s manage to resolve a number of border disagreements among member states. In 1982, the GCC resolved a boundary dispute between Oman and South Yemen and temporarily resolved a Qatari-Bahraini border dispute in 1986, in addition to negotiating a Saudi-Omani border agreement in 1990 (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 153). The GCC has thus helped to stop escalation of conflict, rather than becoming involved in intractable conflicts already in progress. In Pinfari’s words:

‘the record of the GCC shows that it mediated in an extremely limited number of conflicts and crises, but also that, overall, many of these interventions were successful [...] it intervened in seven regional or sub-regional conflicts or crises since 1981, and that it at least contributed to success of mediation efforts on four occasions (57 percent). Yet, if analysed in detail, the record of the GCC in mediating regional conflicts and crises in the Middle East and in its sub-region is much less impressive than the data may suggest’ (Pinfari, 2009, p. 15).

Indeed, most of the diplomatic activity that the GCC has managed has been implemented bilaterally by member states, rather than under the aegis of the GCC itself (Pinfari, 2009, p. 17) – the Yemen civil war is a good example of this continued practice, examined below. For instance Saudi Arabia, invoking the name of the GCC, intervened in 1986–7 to stop the escalation of tensions between Bahrain and Qatar, with actual GCC involvement ‘limited to overseeing the Saudi-brokered agreement which provided for the restoration of the status quo ante’ (Pinfari, 2009, p. 17). Similarly, in 1982, the GCC ‘sponsored’ mediation between Kuwait and UAE and between Oman and South Yemen, while also voicing ‘support’ for Qatari efforts to mediate the 2007–8 Lebanese presidential crisis (Pinfari, 2009, p. 17).

Much like the League of Arab States, then, the GCC can be conceived of as ‘a forum for policy coordination between member states,’ having remained relatively passive in the arena of peacebuilding, instead supporting initiatives driven by individual member states (often Qatar or Saudi Arabia) (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 155). In contrast, ‘regional initiatives initiated to encourage “positive peace” have also remained limited. The disbursement and implementation of humanitarian and development aid by GCC states, through which well-being could be fostered within the region, occurs primarily at the national level, with the GCC acting merely as a forum for coordination and informal consensus-building on the distribution of this aid’ (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 155).

As Aarts explains, the GCC's unity and efficiency is dependent on the threat level to member states; indeed, the body was founded due to fear of external threats. In his words, '[t]he GCC's efficacy depends on the fear of (internal and external) threats. In times of tranquillity, tensions among the member states grow; in times of turmoil, these disappear. All in all, persistent rivalries and suspicions among these Gulf states have made economic (and strategic) collaboration tenuous and fragile' (Aarts, 1999, p. 912). When threats are thought to come from within the body of the GCC itself, as happened with the 2017 GCC diplomatic crisis when Qatar was isolated, the fragility of the institution becomes clear.

Case Study 1: Bahrain (2011)

On 14 March 2011, one month after the start of pro-democracy protests in Bahrain inspired by the Arab Spring, 2,000 troops (1,200 from Saudi Arabia and 800 from the UAE) under the aegis of the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force entered Bahrain with the goal of subduing the protest movement (Bronner and Slackman, 2011). This mobilisation represented the first time the GCC had used its forces to resolve a domestic political issue, with the Bahraini Government's insistence that it had invited the force in to help it control protesters (Bronner and Slackman, 2011). 'This is the initial phase', a Saudi official said. 'Bahrain will get whatever assistance it needs. It's open-ended' (Bronner and Slackman, 2011).

Coverage of the event tended to view the use of force as a Saudi initiative, given the number of Saudi troops involved and given the strategic importance of Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. It was also seen to inflame the opposition further, who dubbed military involvement 'an occupation' (Bronner and Slackman, 2011). Iran, which has been suspected of providing support to many of the Shi'i protesters in Bahrain, also vocally protested the move as an invasion (Amies, 2011), as Bahrain increasingly came to be seen as the site of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, the UN released a statement saying that then Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was 'troubled' by the use of force in Bahrain and called on all involved to 'exercise maximum restraint' (Amies, 2011). It has been speculated that the use of force was meant to deter Saudi Shi'i populations in its oil-rich Eastern Province from provoking a similar rebellion, thus demonstrating how Saudi Arabia potentially used the aegis of the GCC for its own political purposes (Amies, 2011).

Since the GCC's involvement in 2011 in attempting to subdue protesters, Bahrain has successfully sidelined its protest movement through arrests and bans on oppositional political parties which followed more violent action towards protesters. Bahrain has also, since 2011, increasingly come to be seen as a Saudi vassal state, 'retweet island' in the words of many Qataris. What was originally framed as a GCC intervention, then, had major domestic political consequences for the Bahraini opposition, enhanced fears of Iranian and Saudi meddling into internal GCC affairs, and showcased Saudi authority more than GCC authority. The 2011 operation also did nothing to enhance peacebuilding/peacemaking, since its goal was solely physical, stopping protests themselves, and thus did not lead to an opposition dialogue or the release of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, with the Bahraini king commissioned months later after discussions with the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Case Study 2: Yemen (2011-present)

In February 2011, at the height of the Arab Spring, protests also emerged in Yemen, with protesters eventually demanding the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The GCC states were eager to ensure that such unrest did not spill into their countries and thus began to work towards finding a political settlement to stop the protests (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 158).

In April 2011, a group of Yemeni opposition parties came together to submit a proposal to transfer power to Vice President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, and the GCC later presented a mediation plan that provided for the same transfer of power with the addition of a clause granting Saleh immunity from prosecution. The GCC Initiative ‘safeguarded a role for the GCC to influence Yemen’s trajectory, while pretending to cave in to some demands of the protesters by calling for a release of unlawfully detained people and the formation of a national unity government that was supposed to govern by consensus’ (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 158–9). It was not until November 2011, however, that Saleh ultimately stepped down, under pressure from a UN resolution released in October calling for him to sign the GCC proposal on the threat of EU and UN sanctions.

The GCC plan, though, proved to be short-termist in outlook, as it failed to break down the system of elites that had led to the uprising itself: ‘while the GCC initiative initially managed to establish a temporary “negative peace” between political elites that buttressed the influence of the Gulf monarchies in the future trajectory of Yemen, it failed to sufficiently address the marginalisation of certain social groups and contribute to a comprehensive “positive peace” that could offer a more sustainable solution to the crisis by transforming those social structures that had encouraged the uprising of 2011’ (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 158–9). Indeed, the system of political patronage established under Saleh remained in place, with budgetary support provided to the Hadi government through the GCC effectively putting in place a new patronage system to guarantee support of the military and tribes for Hadi without ultimately building real political legitimacy (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 158–9). Hadi’s fundamental lack of legitimacy was revealed in 2014 when the Houthis used popular dissatisfaction with the government’s policies of cutting fuel subsidies and decreasing cash support for the poor to seize the capital of Sanaa, putting President Hadi under house arrest between September 2014 and January 2015, when he resigned (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 158–9). After Hadi escaped to Aden, he annulled his resignation, leading the Houthis in turn to cancel the constitution and grant political power to the militia (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 158–9).

As the Houthis advanced on Aden, Hadi requested military support from the GCC on 24 March 2015. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE responded positively to the request due to concerns about regional security, but Oman rejected military intervention and remained neutral. The military coalition thus could not be dubbed a GCC force but instead included Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, UAE, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, with US backing (Hoetjes, 2021, p. 160). Still,

According to Edward Burke, it was an ‘unprecedented leap into foreign policy by an organization that has normally confined itself to economic affairs’— all the more in a country that is not a member of the GCC. Arguably, it was also the first time since its foundation that the Arab League did not intervene in a major crisis in Yemen, in contrast to what happened in at least six other occasions since 1945 (in 1948, 1963, 1972, 1974, 1979, and 1994) [...]. One could conclude that the increased activism of the Saudi-led GCC in the entire Arabian Peninsula has ‘subregionalized’ the Arab League and transformed it into a de facto ‘sub-Arab’ organization responsible for the management of Arab relations outside the sphere of influence of the GCC. The caution with which GCC countries approached the Libyan and Syrian crises (where the Arab League took the lead), especially when compared with their interventions in the affairs of Yemen, seems to confirm this intuition (Pinfari, 2016).

The increased activism of the GCC, particularly of Saudi Arabia within the GCC, thus had the potential to convert the organisation into a more active member of the peacebuilding/peacemaking community. Nonetheless, its lack of success in Bahrain and Yemen undermined this role.

In Yemen, seven years since the start of the war, much of the country’s north is under Houthi control, while the south was captured in 2019 by the Southern Transitional Council and houses Aden, the home of Yemen’s internationally recognised but beleaguered government. Further, between 2015 and the end of 2021, Amnesty International has confirmed that 377,000 people have been killed, directly and indirectly, including civilians, and the Houthis have ramped up attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE since the start of the war (Haddad, 2022). The coalition that initially aided the Hadi Government has also crumbled, with the UAE withdrawing most of its ground troops in 2019, and in February 2021 US President Biden ending, at least rhetorically, US support for the war’s offensive operations and temporarily halting arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE (BBC, 2021).

Human Rights Watch has called Yemen ‘the largest humanitarian crisis in the world’, with 18,400 civilians estimated to have been killed and with nearly 20.1 million people (about two-thirds of the population) in need of food assistance since the start of 2020 (HRW, 2021). Yemen’s economy has been left in tatters, forcing many to rely on humanitarian aid to survive, and all sides of the conflict have committed serious human rights violations (HRW, 2021). The GCC has not managed a unified humanitarian response, with individual states instead using their local state-backed organisations to do so (Almezaini, 2021).

Case Study 3: The GCC Crisis (2017–21)

On 5 June 2017, three members of the GCC – Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Egypt – cut off diplomatic, as well as air, land and sea links with Qatar. They also demanded that their nationals living in Qatar return to their home countries within 14 days and gave Qataris living in the blockading states 14 days to return to Qatar. The move was taken without any consultation within the GCC, and, although annual GCC meetings were considered potential venues for resolution of the conflict, Kuwait was the primary mediator in the conflict, with US backing (Fraihat, 2020).

Ultimately, although the crisis did not lead to or appear to involve the threat of violent conflict, it did dramatically increase tensions in the region. The rift was repaired in January 2021, at the GCC summit in Al-Ula, at which the GCC leaders pledged ‘to achieve coordination and integration between the Member States in all fields to eventually reach a union of states’ and ‘to achieve security, peace, stability, and prosperity in the region by working as a single, unified economic and political group’ (Khalid, 2021). Such statements are, in effect, an admission that the GCC was not previously working as a unified body.

More than one year since the signing of the Al-Ula Accord, however, the GCC has not worked in tandem any more than it did prior to the rift, and indeed bilateral meetings, for instance between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, seem much more prominent than multilateral unity, especially as rumours of a UAE-Saudi rift have emerged (Al-Jaber, 2021).

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), initially named the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, was founded in 1969 in Morocco with 24 member states in response to an arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Headquartered in Jeddah, the OIC has long focused on protection of the Palestinian Territories as a unifying issue. The body’s founding mission was ‘to be guided by the noble Islamic values of unity and fraternity, and affirming the essentiality of promoting and consolidating the unity and solidarity among the Member States in securing their common interests at the international arena’ (OIC, 1969). Today, the OIC has 57 member states from every region of the world and also includes states with substantial Muslim minorities like Russia and India (Akbarzadeh and Connor, 2005, p. 79).

Despite an initial show of unity around the Palestinian cause, as of 2019, more than 60 percent of all world conflicts have occurred in OIC countries (Farasin, 2019). Fadi Farasin identifies three institutional shortcomings of the OIC that have made it unable to remedy conflicts. First, the OIC, like the other regional organisations described here, ‘lacks an overall and primary organ for overseeing peace and security issues. For example, the United Nations has the UN Security Council and the African Union has the Peace and

Security Council' (Farasin, 2019). Second, the OIC lacks a peace force that could help to provide security in conflict situations and thus aid greatly in peacebuilding/peacemaking processes (Farasin, 2019). Third, the OIC does not house an early warning system that could allow conflicts to be addressed before their escalation (Farasin, 2019).

In recent years, however, effort have been made to expand the OIC's conflict resolution capabilities and to operationalise them, but sovereignty remains enshrined in the organisation's charter, making it difficult for the organisation to become involved in conflict without an invitation to do so (OIC, 2016). Notably, the OIC did intervene successfully in the Philippines and propose a peace treaty in 1996, although it had no means of implementing it; it also intervened in Thailand in 2005 on the invitation of the Thai government to observe the conditions of Thai Muslims in the south of the country (Sharqieh, 2012). The OIC additionally established a Contact Group in Somalia, but this mission too ultimately reached a dead end, like the UN-led process, spurring Ethiopian military intervention in 2006 (Sharqieh, 2012). The OIC proved slightly more effective in providing a humanitarian response in Somalia in 2011 (Sharqieh, 2012).

Still, different stances politically and religiously, as well as differing regional priorities, have made unity in the OIC elusive. In particular, the OIC has increasingly become an arena for Iranian-Saudi competition over leading the Islamic world (Akbarzadeh and Connor, 2005). Further, differences in position towards the United States came to the fore on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and stances on Palestine/Israel, once a unifying force for the organisation but now increasingly varied, have also proven difficult to resolve. By and large, then, '[s]tricken by infighting, power struggles and a failure to articulate clear and consistent policies, the OIC is more a symbolic meeting place than a dynamic political body' (Akbarzadeh and Connor, 2005, p. 80). Indeed, it is difficult to find a recent case study of successful OIC involvement in conflict in MENA, since its member states are so disparate and since most of its actions have been through issuing statements, rather than coordinating concrete missions.

Findings: A Region without Regionalism

By and large, the MENA countries remain divided in terms of geopolitical strategy (positions towards US, Iran, Israel) and ideology (Sunni vs Shi'i, positions towards Islamism), to such an extent that it has been difficult for them to come together to work effectively in the peacebuilding/peacemaking space. Where unity has been found, it has been to stop conflict as it is ongoing, rather than to halt its emergence or to address its root cause(s). The short-termist outlook is a consequence of concerns about protecting national sovereignty above all else in a region in which political legitimacy mostly does not come from popularity or democracy. As a result, bilateralism reigns, and ample space exists for external powers to become involved in regional Middle Eastern conflicts.

Further, all three of these regional organisations appear more willing to become involved in ongoing conflicts to stop immediate violence or prospects for its emergence, rather than to put in place a positive peace through, for instance, hosting dialogues or facilitating negotiation. This practice showcases the short-termist thinking that dominates MENA regional organisations highlighted at the start of this report. Such short-termism is indicative of the very real political divisions among these states, which makes longer term cooperation and policy coordination unlikely.

The MENA region is unique in three ways when it comes to regional involvement in peace-making/peacebuilding: (1) its regional organisations were founded on the basis of shared cultural characteristics and in some ways shared perspectives towards perceived regional enemies such as Iran or Israel; (2) MENA houses primarily authoritarian regimes which do not allow civil society involvement in foreign policy or even humanitarian efforts; (3) the region is home to several ongoing political conflicts. These three dynamics, which could have theoretically spurred greater commitment to multilateralism, have in fact had the opposite effect, particularly as the similarities which once bound these states together have increasingly dissipated, with each state developing a different perception of where geopolitical threats lie and focusing on shoring up political legitimacy at home. In such an environment, international actors have a role, but should become involved in regional MENA conflicts under the aegis of coordinated multilateralism, rather than continuing to spur short-termist bilateral and unilateral action.

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Cover Image

The crest of the Arab League in its Cairo headquarters, September 2011.

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