

Joint Military Force for the Arab League: Feasible or Not?

Written by Rhea Abraham

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RHEA ABRAHAM, MAR 29 2015

The Arab League under Secretary General Nabil al Arabi, recently announced the establishment of a joint fighting force in the wake of the increasing threat posed by the ISIS to the Arab region as a whole. Its establishment is aimed at fighting any extremist groups, and aiding peacekeeping operations and humanitarian efforts in the future. The Secretary General stressed on the importance of cooperation in areas of security and exchange of information among the Arab countries. The creation of such a joint force also formed a major topic of discussion at the March 28-29 Arab League Summit in Sharm al-Sheikh, a proposal strongly advocated by Egypt and other members like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE and Jordan.

In the light of these ongoing discussions, one needs to ponder over certain questions that are being raised by scholars and academics alike, mainly on the importance of the Arab League in security related concerns and the feasibility of a joint military task force for the future security environment.

The Arab League and Regional Security

The Arab League or the League of Arab States is a regional organization of Arab countries in Africa and Asia and was founded in 1945, initially with six members. The Arab League's main goal is to facilitate political, social, economic and cultural interests of the Arab world as well as coordinate and deliberate policy concerns in the region. In 1950, the League signed the Joint Defence and Economic Cooperation agreement, which committed the signatories to coordination of military measures. However, nothing concrete has fructified so far.

In the past, events calling for Arab unity such as the Second Intifada of 2002 have provoked major joint action by the League in terms of security measures such as the Arab Peace Initiative aimed at resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The Arab League, which played a limited role in 2011 and 2012 in the Arab Spring protests, has slowly awakened to the reality of human rights issues playing out in the region. Along with setting up discussions on related political and social issues, the League has started to initiate concerns on the regional security threat emerging from terrorist organisations and the recruitment of Arabs for the same. Another issue that has been followed recently has been the reform of its Charter, including references to the promotion and protection of human rights as one of the aims of the organization. However, decisions on this have been repeatedly delayed. In February 2011, with the Libyan crisis, the League suspended Libya's right to participate in all bodies and meetings as a part of protest against the violence being used against civilians, while at the same time rejecting any foreign intervention in the region. The Arab League nonetheless requested the UNSC to impose a no fly zone over Libya. Likewise, in the recent Syrian imbroglio, the League suspended Syria's membership, imposed sanctions on the regime, and attempted to mediate in the conflict.

Post 2014, the Arab states under the umbrella of the Arab League unanimously condemned the actions of the ISIS, while differing in strategy to the issue such as Egypt's individual attempt to airstrike the ISIS targets in Libya. However, the resolution adopted during the emergency meeting last year – issued as a separate statement – reflected a new sense of urgency among the member states to challenge the militant group that was seizing strategic parts of Iraq and Syria. The resolution called for immediate measures to combat the group on the political, defence,

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security and legal levels. The resolution also backed the United Nations resolution that imposed sanctions on the ISIS and called on countries to adopt measures to combat terrorism. The council resolution was adopted under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter for military intervention.

Following such initiatives, the League's efforts to form a joint task force seem to be a desperate call for military intervention, and an urgent remedy for resolving the instability in the region and restoring peace once and for all.

Challenges for a Joint Task Force

Despite several efforts, an Arab League joint force seems unlikely due to the separate and different foreign policy interests and national capabilities. Even the Gulf Cooperation Council with a more concentrated and concise regional aspiration has not been successful in moulding its joint task force, despite the triumph of the Peninsula Shield force in the recent Arab Spring protests. A number of issues were brought to the fore at the summit in the light of such initiatives, issues ranging from sovereignty, overriding disagreements on various issues including boundary disputes, and weak enforcement mechanisms of the Arab League's Charter for broad action.

Another major bone of contention remains the question of the role of the Arab League as a regional organisation and its importance in the current security environment. Other than raising significant issues, the Arab League has not been able to resolve any major regional challenges including threats from extremist organisations, in the midst of many clashing interests of the stakeholders. The resulting lack of coordination has plagued efforts toward collective Arab security since the League's inception.

The organisation is therefore aware of its limitations and has referred to the 1950 Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation, proposed following the disastrous Arab League effort in the 1948 war with Israel, as playing an inadequate role. Though the Treaty aimed to set up regional bodies for mutual defence planning, it took over a decade for it to be ratified by all the member states. The Egyptian-led initiative at forming a United Arab Command in 1964 floundered over issues of poor coordination, leaving member nations Egypt, Jordan and Syria underprepared for the 1967 war with Israel. Even Article 2 of the 1950 agreement, which condemns acts of aggression against any of the League's member states and mainly aimed at the aggression of Israel towards member states, has failed to prove a unifying force against any other third party in the long run. Also, lessons from previous interventions such as the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the consequent Gulf war, or the 2003 American invasion of Iraq has only showcased the League's failure to create a common standpoint. Currently, the most prominent rift as evident in the previous Arab League meetings has been witnessed between Egypt and Qatar, with the two countries holding starkly different outlooks on the role of political Islam in the region. Both the nations have also accused each other of funding terrorism in the region, covertly.

Therefore, as optimistic as the initiative of a task force sounds, it is difficult to believe that the proposal would attract much support beyond a core alliance of Sunni states, chiefly Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the UAE, prompting Egypt to play into fears of expansionism by Shia groups and Iran. The member states may also bring forward sectarian views into the issue of the ISIS and suspect funding of the organisation by member states.

The Way Ahead

One of the ISIS's biggest strengths is its ability to recruit people from across various borders. It is thereby important to understand the kind of threat the group poses to the region and the long term strategic combat against the organisation which mainly requires a unified Arab thinking and simple cooperative methods. In such circumstances, more intelligence co-operation and a centralised intelligence gathering mechanism is the need of the hour, one which does not infringe on the sovereignty of member states and one that can be unanimously and immediately passed by the League. An 'Arabpol' therefore might be an easier goal to achieve in the current security environment than the task of agreeing and setting up a military task force, which is an initiative that can be constructed in the coming years.

Secondly, the League needs to also focus simultaneously on restructuring the objectives of the organisation and improving techniques of crisis reduction. The League requires a systematic approach to address security issues in

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terms of crisis prevention and not merely manage threats that emerge suddenly, such that they form a regular part of the discussion at meetings and forums. Also, the League should realize the importance of collaborative decision making and unanimous agreements that look beyond the inadequacy of the Charter and related loopholes, as mentioned earlier, in order to respond effectively to the needs of the region. To be able to contribute for long term security and stability related goals, the establishment of an effective Human Rights system under the auspices of the Arab League, structural reforms and greater interaction with the civil society organisations should be encouraged at the political and social levels of the League in the coming meetings.

About the author:

Rhea Abraham is currently pursuing her doctorate in Gulf Studies from Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. She graduated in Journalism from Madras Christian College and completed her post graduation in Geopolitics and International Relations from Manipal University. She also worked as an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi on Pakistan's Afghan Policy. She has published articles on Indian Diaspora in the Arab Gulf, Iran-US Nuclear talks, Afghan Refugees in Iran and Pakistan and also on Media and National Security.