Introduction to a general reading of the Arab scene

Ahmad Yousef Ahmad

Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt

ABSTRACT
This paper provides a reading of the current Arab scene with a view to understanding the reasons for its present frustrating and depressing decline. The establishment of the Arab League in 1945 embodied the birth of the modern Arab regional system. The rise of a period of pan-Arab nationalism saw numerous successes for the Arab system and possibilities for achieving Arab unity. However, this was followed by the defeat of the 1967 war, inter-Arab conflicts, the other setbacks for pan-Arabism and increasing foreign penetration, particularly by the United States, Israel, Turkey and Iran. This foreign interference, increasing terrorism and the rise of sectarian and ethnic divisions now threaten the integrity of the Arab system as well as the Arab identity. The Arab system and the Arab League are failing to tackle these threats effectively and the League has made decisions that have had serious repercussions for many critical Arab issues. The Arab Spring represented a hope for a renaissance of the Arab system, but in some cases it has worsened foreign penetration and caused further instability. This paper proposes that it is necessary to examine the features of the Arab scene in order to understand its predicament and reflect on the prospects for this decline to be exacerbated or contained. The conclusion looks at several possible future scenarios for the Arab scene.

KEYWORDS
Arab league; Arab regional system; Arab spring; Gulf cooperation council; ISIS

Introduction
The study of current conditions in the Arab world has become a source of depressing and suffocating frustration, heartbreak and horror. How could this not be so? The hope of genuinely rectifying the path of the Arab regional system that began with the promising signs of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ has turned into the horror now seen in the Arab nation. Following the tragedy of the Palestinian people, millions more of the great Arab community have been forced to leave their homeland for foreign lands where they dream of having a better future. If they succeed, this proves the failure of the Arab regional system and its components. If they fail, this attests to the debasing of their human dignity, indeed the loss of their right to life.
The Arab countries which were enthusiastic supporters of Arab unity now consider certain states to be an obstacle hindering the realization of this unity since these are either in either legal or actual collapse, or are in danger of becoming so. The safeguarding of these entities and regional peace has become an inaccessible dream. The Arab nation has been infiltrated in every way by greedy or mercenary global and regional forces in a way that ranks as terrorism, be it for the sake of their own morbid intentions or on behalf of foreign powers with their own strategies and interests. Israel, the chief enemy of the Arab nation, is experiencing its most brilliant phase as the Arab community has been too preoccupied with confronting the threats of terrorism and state collapse to try and recover the rights of the Palestinian people and protect them from the increasing and barbaric Zionist attacks.

As the currents of sectarianism, fanaticism and partisanship threaten our Arab identity, the Arab League has not even taken any effective or useful action to tackle the unexpected dangers that are surrounding the Arab community and tearing it apart. Instead, the League has led the community to decisions that have had serious repercussions for many critical Arab issues.

Under these circumstances, a reading of the current Arab scene has become more of a psychological dilemma than an analytical problem. Despite that, we must attempt to study the features of the scene if we are to comprehend its predicament and reflect on the possibilities for this to be exacerbated or contained. Therefore, we will review scenarios for the future development of the Arab scene and the nature of the movement required if we want to stop its decline and try for a better tomorrow. In this framework, the present study will cover five aspects of the Arab scene and conclude with a discussion about the future.

Lessons from past experience

The establishment of the Arab League in 1945 represented an organizational embodiment of the birth of the modern Arab regional system, even if the popular foundation for this birth had long preceded that. Since some Arab states, including those that set up the League, had not gained their independence, the League was inherently weak and this problem still afflicts it today. The Arabs suffered their first defeat in the conflict against Israel three years after the League’s creation. Nonetheless, the repercussions of this defeat paved the way for serious attempts at its development. This was evident in the signing of a joint treaty on Arab defence and economic cooperation in 1950. Moreover, the same repercussions were a significant factor in hastening the July revolution of 1952 which brought about a tide of pan-Arab nationalism (قوميّة) from the start of 1955 that saw the elimination of European colonialism and occupation in most of the Arab world. The exception was Palestine where the foundations of an organized resistance were laid and its political entity took shape from 1964. During this time of rising pan-Arabism, the Arab system succeeded in facing foreign attempts at penetration. The most important projects during this period were the alliance between Baghdad and Eisenhower and the historical achievement of the Egyptian–Syrian unification (النطاق العربي, 1958–61). Despite the collapse of the unification which lasted less than four years, it was firstly proof of the possibility of achieving Arab unity and secondly the source of important lessons for the struggle for Arab unity, as well as a spur for the Iraqi revolution in July 1958. Furthermore, this period of pan-Arab nationalism achieved
significant steps on the road to social justice, just as the movement of the Arab republics was characteristically effective in a number of battles in which the Arabs confronted their enemies.

Although numerous inter-Arab conflicts marred this period of an Arab nationalist tide, it is notable, first, that a significant part of these conflicts had a developmental function. Second, these struggles would disappear into the background with the emergence of an external threat to the Arab system, thus giving the opportunity to set up an Arab alliance against this threat. This happened during the tripartite attack against Egypt in 1956 and the Israeli attack in 1967. The Arab alliance continued successfully until the October 1973 war which represented the apex of Arab solidarity when faced with the enemies of the Arab community. We will examine these two characteristics of the Arab–Arab conflict in the later stages of the development of the Arab system, specifically after the Gulf crisis of 1990.

After the defeat of 1967, the period of pan-Arab nationalism suffered a severe blow. Without doubt, the dissolution of the Egyptian–Syrian unification in 1961 was a setback. However, the continuing revolutionary tide, especially after the Yemeni revolution’s success in the year following the country’s separation and its overwhelming military support from Egypt, guaranteed the continuing wave of pan-Arabism. Nevertheless, the defeat of 1967 was a setback for this nationalist tide, although it continued whether with the escalation of the movement for liberation from British occupation in South Yemen reaching its independence just five months after the defeat of June 1967, or with the serious willingness to stop the effects of Israeli hostility. This was apparent in the War of Attrition on the Egyptian front (1967–70), the first precedent for planned Arab action in the military sphere which also emerged during the war of October 1973. Likewise, the first precedent for Arab strategic planning was in the employment of oil as a weapon during the war.

However, the political management of the gains from the war confirmed the negative repercussions of the June 1967 defeat. The Egyptian president Anwar Sadat signed the first agreement with Israel for the disengagement of military forces in January 1974 which, among its other shortcomings, ended the use of oil as a weapon. Sadat then reached a second agreement for the disengagement in September 1975 and, in accordance with this, Egypt ended hostilities with Israel in exchange for the freeing a second part of the Sinai (the first part was the area liberated by Egyptian forces during the war). Consequently, the remaining area of the Sinai remained under Israeli occupation, dependent on the negotiations with Israel. This led Sadat to visit Jerusalem in 1977 and reach an agreement with Israel at Camp David in 1978, followed by the peace treaty in 1979. These developments were the start of an almost complete schism between Egypt and the other Arab states as well as the start or confirmation of a period in which the nationalist tide ended and was replaced a clear decline that accompanied the Arab system. However, the developments of the Iraq–Iran war (1980–88) facilitated the resumption of Egyptian–Iraqi relations. As soon as this had taken place, it revived hopes there would be positive results for the Arab system. However, the crisis over the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait occurred which was a sign of division in the development of the Arab system for at least two reasons. The first reason was that the security threat to the Arab state had come from within the Arab system, thus casting doubts on the concept of collective Arab security and its priorities. The second reason was that this invasion was propelled by
unprecedented international interference led by the United States and this ushered in greater penetration and destruction of the Arab system, especially after the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

During the stage of decline, foreign occupation returned to the Arab nation, as seen in the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in 2006. The Arab system which had been the wall deterring any attempts at foreign penetration collapsed. Hence, Israeli penetration of the Arab nation increased after the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty and likewise after the American invasion of Iraq. This was aside from the fact that some Arab states hurried to establish trade relations with Israel, even full diplomatic relations, as in the case of Mauritania. However, Mauritania was the only Arab state to break off relations with Israel in response to its brutal attack on Gaza from December 2008 to January 2009. Likewise, American penetration of the region increased after the American administration’s role in the official peace between Egypt and Israel, the intensification of America’s grip over Egypt and after the invasion of Iraq whose fate America also abused. Moreover, Iranian penetration also increased after the disassembly of all parts of the Iraqi state.

The goal of Arab unity gradually began to fade and this became clear firstly in the falling numbers of unification projects and secondly in the formation of separate groups. The only group to withstand this was the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) but this suffers from its own members’ acknowledgment of its ineffectiveness. Moreover, an initiative by the late King Abdullah to transform the GCC into a union met with failure. Hence, we enter a period of state collapse, beginning with Somalia in the 1990s until Sudan in 2006, in addition to the threat of collapse facing Yemen in 1994 and in the first decade of this century as well as the same threat to Iraq since the American invasion. Moreover, the goal of achieving social justice was abandoned, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissemination of statements about the victory of capitalism and the end of history, the enthusiasm of the various Arab ruling elites for these developments, the adoption of capitalist frameworks for development and the obvious marriage between governments and finance. Last but not least, the Arab republics ruled over a state of silence in the face of everything afflicting the Arab nation. This was such that a number of non-Arab republics, including the European states and America, were able to make advances more than the Arab republics. This was seen clearly in two events, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Furthermore, the inter-Arab conflicts acquired an attritional nature, lasting years without yielding any developmental results.

Nevertheless, these historical stages show certain essential characteristics and features, though there were some exceptions. The period of the pan-Arab nationalist tide saw the breakdown of the Egyptian–Syrian unification but that did not influence its general development. The period of its decline saw historical achievements such as the Lebanese resistance forcing the withdrawal of Israel in two decades, firstly after its occupation of 1982 and secondly with the liberation of the occupied strip of south Lebanon in 2000 as well as the successful opposition to the Israeli attack in 2006. Similarly, the Iraqi resistance forced the American occupation to evacuate from Iraq after it had inflicted hundreds of thousands of deaths and injuries on the Iraqi people.

The Palestinian resistance manifested in its strongest form twice, during the first intifada (‘the intifada of stones’) which began in December 1987 and during the second
intifada (the al-Aqsa intifada) which began in September 2000. The first intifada led to Israel’s signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 which, despite its grave faults, represented Israel’s first recognition of the Palestinian people and their political organization. Meanwhile, the repercussions of the second intifada forced Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and the collapse of the settlements around it in the first precedent of its kind. Yemeni unification was achieved in 1990 and it triumphed militarily over its enemies in 1994. However, in the same region where the Egyptian–Syrian unification broke down and did not influence the general course of the nationalist tide, unfortunately, the heroes of the Arab resistance could not stop the Israeli occupation of Arab lands or counter the effects of the American invasion of Iraq on the state and its people. The poor performance of the Yemeni regime after the victory over the separatists in 1994 caused the development of a rebellion in south Yemen that gradually went as far as demanding separation. The official performance of the Arab system reflected a state of complete incapacity as shown by the Arab–Israeli conflict. The Arab system was considering a settlement with Israel in accordance with the Fes initiative of 1982, made when the official peace between Egypt and Israel had gained global attention. The Fes initiative remained on the table for 20 years until it was replaced by the Beirut initiative in 2002 which included heavier concessions for the Palestinians and has failed up to now to advance even an inch towards a balanced settlement of the Arab–Israeli conflict. This was the Arab scene shortly before the political earthquake that was named ‘the Arab Spring’.

The structure of the Arab system

When the first spark ignited of an uprising by Arab people against their autocratic regime in Tunisia at the end of 2010, it spread remarkably fast to a number of Arab countries, most notably Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. The uprisings embodied great hopes that they would be the beginning of a radical reform or even a transformation in the Arab system. The starting point for this was that the people in these countries now had the means to seize their fate and establish democratic governments characterized by competence and effectiveness. However, the divisions among the revolutionary forces, their lack of organization and the speed with which the organized forces of what were termed ‘political Islam’ jumped to grab power as well as indirect and direct foreign interference (which unfortunately happened at the invitation of some Arabs) were all factors that caused the existing situation in the Arab system: half revolutions or less, conflicts within one state between rival enemies, blatant inter-Arab, regional and international interference in Arab countries, the unprecedented terrorist push that relies on Arab and foreign fighters as exemplified by the group ‘Islamic State’ (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq and the real threat to the existence of many of the Arab state entities.

Hence, there has clearly been an unexpected change in the map of conflicts in the Arab nation. Those following this map will easily realize how this has changed from being mainly Arab regional conflicts, such as the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Iran–Iraq war, and inter-Arab disagreements, such as the Saudi Arabia–Yemen, Saudi–Hashemite, Iraq–Kuwait, Syria–Iraq, Egypt–Sudan conflicts. Algeria–Morocco and the Yemen–Yemen conflict before unification. This map has changed to spread conflicts within the same Arab
nations to a striking extent, as we now see clearly and to varying degrees in Somalia, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon, and the list may go on.

It is true that the apparent roots of the internal Arab conflicts go back to the early stages of the birth of the modern Arab system, as in the cases of Yemen, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq. The conflicts there began in the 1940s and 1950s and systematically expanded after that in later decades. Moreover, these conflicts include other cases, for example, Somalia in the 1990s. However, the picture now seems different, given its greater severity, complications and more obvious foreign interference.

The phenomenon of conflicts within the Arab nations is generally attributable to various geographical, population, economic and political factors. Nevertheless, the deterioration in recent years until the present situation goes back to the repercussions of the Arab Spring, as seems to be the case in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. The result was that at the same time as the removal of the leaders in these countries, or attempts to remove them, there was a lack of revolutionary forces capable of translating those attempts into real change expressed by stable political systems. Among the cases of clear instability, those that became critical were Syria, Libya and Yemen. This situation was aggravated by the fact that the political current which links itself to Islam was, as a result of its well-known good organization, able to dominate political interactions to one extent or another even now, as in Tunisia and Egypt. This current was also an effective alternative, for example in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq, and its removal was a source of a new conflict, such as in Egypt at the start of June 2013. Furthermore, the variations in that current and the extremely violent groups it contains have led for the first time in modern history to terrorism achieving regional gains. In the case of ISIS, it declared itself a state in Iraq and Syria and made attempts to penetrate Libya, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and even Egypt.

In addition to the factors explained previously, support for terrorism exists within the Arab system and accusations of this have been directed at the ruling regimes in Sudan and Qatar. There is also the financial support which terrorism obtains from unofficial Arab circles and from the Muslim Brotherhood’s international organization as well as perhaps some of the bigger regional powers. In addition to this is the ambiguous American position with regard to terrorism. It seems American strategic thinking, either erroneously or tendentiously, bet that the Muslim Brotherhood, despite their apparent violence, would be an essential factor in the future of the Middle East. However, this was an erroneous bet due to the Brotherhood’s clear failure to rule in Egypt, and also to a lesser extent in Tunisia. Otherwise, it was a tendentious choice, meaning that the American intention behind this thinking was contrived to inject the political process in the region with the virus of instability and fragmentation in order to facilitate control over the region. However, realizing this control will not necessarily be easy in view of the destructive chaos that may prevail.

The danger of worsening internal conflicts is revealed not least by features that were previously unusual in these disputes, for example the sectarian dimension, specifically the Sunni–Shi’ite axis that is evident in the cases of Iraq and Syria, and less so in Yemen. Likewise, there is the Islamic–Christian dimension due to the extremist organizations which link themselves to Islam and their attitude towards non-Muslims which has caused the repulsive killings and destruction of places of worship. In addition to these two features is the emerging role of non-state actors, for example, Hezbollah which fought in
Lebanon alongside the Syrian regime, ISIS which declared its ‘state’ on part of the lands of Iraq and Syria and Hamas which is accused by Egypt of supporting terrorism in Sinai.

All of this has resulted in a case of extreme polarization, making it impossible in the short term to reach settlements to these conflicts. Consequently, it has continued even until now to have destructive effects on the structure of the Arab system. These effects are represented by two possible scenarios. The first of these is the clear debilitation afflicting several Arab states, such as Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen, and Lebanon and Egypt to a lesser extent. The second scenario is the frightening division that threatens the Arab system and confirms the sudden change to one of its most important goals, namely that of achieving integration and consolidation between its units. This goal has changed into an attempt to maintain the cohesion and regional integrity of each individual unit. Thus, the Arab system continues to be threatened by an increase in the number of its units by one-third at least. In this scenario of division and in view of the worsening Arab conditions and the increasing penetration from outside, Iraq could break up into three states, as could Syria, Yemen and Libya. This is as well as the existing cases of division in Sudan and Somalia. The continuing weakness, worsening divisions and violent interactions resulting from these conflicts mean that the Arab system will no longer be an effective factor in regional and international equations. Rather, it will withdraw into itself while its conflicts tear it to pieces and penetration of it increases from the outside.

What makes matters worse is that the developments of recent years have revealed that the project to build a modern Arab state has failed with few exceptions in the Arab world. We have seen how ‘the state’ has been either absent in confronting the challenges, or incapable of any effective confrontation. This is clearly exemplified in the cases of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya and well before them in the cases of Somalia and later Sudan. Unfortunately, there may be more cases which are not as obvious. This withdrawal into itself due to facing the repercussions of internal conflicts and the increasing terrorism that threatens the entities of many Arab states has led to a clear change in the Arab system’s agenda of priorities. The issue of confronting terrorism has come at the forefront of these priorities at the expense of other issues, chiefly the Palestinian issue and the Arab–Israeli conflict in general. Thus, the Arab system has lost its practical concern for this issue after having lost its effectiveness.

As well as the map of conflicts and their effect on the structure of the Arab system, there are different types of alliances, such as the GCC. The solid alliance between its members is more characteristic of this organization than the reticence which hindered an initiative to change the council into a union, or the unprecedented crisis it faced when the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain withdrew from Doha. This crisis was eventually resolved on November 2014 with the announcement of the Riyadh Supplementary Agreement in accordance with which the ambassadors returned to Doha. That was after an exceptional summit was held in Riyadh, from which Oman was absent, shortly before the Doha summit that was held in the following month.

The rapprochement between Egypt and the Gulf, excluding Qatar and Oman, has attracted much interest. This may be the emergence of a powerful new Arab alliance, specifically between Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, based on two essential pillars. The first is represented by the decisive support from these two states for the Egyptian regime after the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from rule. This followed the revolt by the Egyptian people on 30 June 2013 which was backed by the armed forces. These
Gulf states endorsed this change, with the Saudi royal palace giving it its blessings only hours after the event, and continued with this position in a clear challenge to the United States and its position towards Egypt. Moreover, the support from these countries comprised two dimensions, both political and economic. As for the second pillar, this is the political role played by the Egyptian regime in stopping the political progress of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab nation, beginning with their time in power in Egypt. With their ideas and conduct, the Brotherhood represented a real fear for the Gulf countries, particularly the UAE. In 2013, the UAE announced that it had discovered a group allied to the Brotherhood that included Egyptians residing in the UAE as well as Emirati citizens that it had recruited. In addition, one of the Brotherhood’s prominent leaders in Egypt issued statements insulting the rulers and people of the UAE.

Likewise, the principle of probable Egyptian military intervention to protect the security of the Arab Gulf was proposed by el-Sisi, the Egyptian president, even before his election. An Arab satellite station asked him whether Egypt would meet the Gulf countries’ request for military assistance against their security threats and he replied that his country would ‘go the distance’. This implied that the Egyptian response to this request would last no longer than the time needed to deal with the danger. Although his reply was quite unspecific, it established a principle that Egypt was serious in its intention to participate in defending the security of the Gulf should any state request that. This probable alliance was put to the test during operation ‘Decisive Storm’ which began in March 2015 in Yemen against the Houthis and the supporters of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Egypt participated in an alliance that was conditional on its provision of naval and air forces. However, reports have spoken of Saudi Arabia’s dissatisfaction with the level of Egyptian participation, specifically the lack of ground troops. That came against a background of earlier reports after the change in leadership in Saudi Arabia that discussed at length about the relationship between this state and Egypt. Moreover, it is very evident now that there was a disagreement between the Egyptian and Saudi visions for solving the Syrian crisis. Despite the strong foundation for Egyptian–Saudi cooperation and the strategic interests shared by the two countries, likewise the UAE’s wide support for Egypt, what concerns us here is that it may be inaccurate to speak of crystallizing a firm tripartite alliance of these three states since there are other types of possible alliances. However, we will deal with them in the analysis of the foreign penetration of the Arab system because they include other regional and international parties.

The threat to Arab identity

The Arab regional system was originally founded on the basis of the distinction between Arabism and Islam. This was not in the sense that there was a contradiction between the two but that it was a genuine ideological justification for the desire for independence from the Ottoman state. This does not mean that all Arabs believed in this concept. Initially, this was an idea particular to the Arab east since the negative aspects of Ottoman rule had been especially apparent in the eastern Arab lands. Some great thinkers contributed to crystallizing and strengthening the concept of Arabism in addition to nationalist parties and organizations and historical Arab leaders. That was in the face of allegations of bias for the nation state as well as for Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Islamic frameworks. The supporters of Arabism regarded the closed framework of state nationalism
(wataniyyah) as obstructing the realization of Arab unity. The Middle Eastern and Mediterranean frameworks were considered tools to divide and tear apart the bonds of Arabism and dilute it since both would divide up parts of the Arab countries and create a basis for a union with other countries that were alien to the Arab identity. As for the Islamic framework, even if it did not contradict with achieving Arab unity in the interim, it would expand its scope to include other Muslim countries which were not tied to the Arab countries except by the bond of religion.

In this framework, the union between Egypt and Syria was achieved (1958–61). It seemed that this achievement was merely the beginning of realizing Arab unity. However, its collapse provoked a broad debate about whether the idea or its application had been wrong. Although numerous leaders and elites in the Arab nation adhered to Arabism and the nationalist tide did not end with the union’s collapse, many factors played a role in disturbing the Arab concept, albeit relatively, as proven by the retreat of attempts at Arab unity over time. These factors included the 1967 defeat, the death of the historic leader Gamal Abdel Nasser without leaving strong and effective institutions to continue his journey, the collapse of the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, the Egyptian–Israeli peace and the gap between the rich and the poor in the Arab world. For some, Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 also played a role in intensifying this disturbance after certain ideas emerged, such as the idea that the danger came from other Arab states not Israel, or that security could only be realized by the will and power of the United States.

Nonetheless, we can state that America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 represented a turning point in this respect. The actual result of its policy in managing Iraq after the invasion was to ignite sectarian dissent that had previously been unknown in this ancient Arab land, although it was acknowledged that the issue of sectarianism existed in a number of Arab countries to some extent or another, including Iraq. The memoir by Paul Bremer, the American administrator of occupied Iraq, confirms America’s irrefutable responsibility for precipitating this sectarian dissent in Iraq. Bremer established the Interim Governing Council which was structured along sectarian and ethnic lines as was the Transitional Law of Administration for Iraq which he also issued. This law came into effect afterwards and formed the basis of the Iraqi constitution which in its turn had a sectarian foundation. The years after the American invasion of Iraq saw a rise in sectarian, religious and ethnic identities which translated into violent conflicts in many cases and added or strengthened a new divisive dimension in Arab societies. The terms ‘Sunni’ and ‘Shi’ite’ came to be present in the intellectual debates in the Arab nation and be repeated in political discourse about the Shi’ites and other Sunni alignments and alliances between or across the states. Moreover, Arab constitutional documents reflected signs of confusion, unease or degeneration in relation to their texts on Arab identity.

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has been shown to be the turning point in escalating sectarian, religious and ethnic identities at the expense of Arab identity with the undertaking and encouragement of American policy and this trend has lasted. Official institutions in western countries, specifically America, persisted in attempting to deepen the concepts that dispossessed the younger Arab generation of this Arabism by intensifying calls for division and separation on sectarian bases. Nevertheless, as Ali al-Din Hilal points out, these ethnicities
lived in peace with one another for long decades. Their sons participated in the nationalist movements demanding independence. Political parties were founded on ideological and intellectual bases, not ethnic and sectarian. The highest positions in these countries were occupied by different ethnicities and sects. The significance of this was that there were no arguments about the need to differentiate ethnic diversity as this was an existential social fact or about the politicization of sectarian relations and political sectarianism.

However, these political and sectarian elements became mixed due to intentional foreign action which has led to a real threat to Arab identity as it constitutes the essential component of the Arab system.

**Increasing foreign penetration**

We have previously mentioned the Arab system’s success during the stage of the nationalist tide in averting all attempts by foreign penetration. However, the wall of resistance began to break down due to the Egyptian–Israeli peace, the Gulf crisis in 1990 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. This is what led to an unprecedented increase in this penetration, whether with regard to the parties active in this or its intensity. Thus, the American, Israeli and Iranian penetration of the Arab system has worsened.

The Arab Spring represented a hope for a renaissance of the Arab system. However, its outcomes, especially in the states where the uprisings removed the heads of the ruling regimes, compounded the phenomenon of foreign penetration of the Arab system because of the thwarted attempts at change and the instability in the states where this change succeeded. This instability in most cases turned into heated internal conflicts. In short, the development of political conditions in all the countries directly affected by the Arab Spring paved the way for instability and division before a specific rise in foreign penetration. This may be analyzed by showing its three dimensions. The first dimension is the flow of fighters or mercenaries into the countries afflicted by conflict, specifically Syria, Libya and Yemen, or the powerful regional and international support for one or other party in the existing conflicts. In addition, the Iraq’s chronic instability, the worsening threat of its collapse and the marginalization of all its traditions are factors that have led to the dangerous phenomenon of Islamic State (ISIS), raising suspicions that it is the product of foreign schemes. In view of the weakness of the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, the repercussions of this phenomenon have been to give an additional push to further Iranian interference in both Iraq and Syria, air strikes launched by the US-led ‘international alliance’ against ISIS in Iraq and Syria without the agreement of the latter, accusations against Turkey about its hidden support for ISIS and, lastly, Russian interference in the Syrian conflict at the request of Syria’s government.

The second dimension in this foreign penetration after the Arab Spring was Arab confusion and weakness. The Arab League’s decisions were indirectly responsible as they eventually led to the NATO intervention in Libya which is considered to be largely responsible for the conditions that have resulted up to now. Similarly, the League could barely control conditions in Syria, especially with regard to a political settlement, or preventing the foreign penetration of the Syrian arena. In Yemen, most of the Arab positions were limited to condemning the Houthi takeover of Sana and the extension of their control over the state. Gulf assistance by anti-Houthi forces, specifically the Saudis, essentially took the form of financial, diplomatic and military aid to support the legitimacy of
President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. However, all this did not prevent the growing Iranian support for the Houthis.

The third dimension in the worsening foreign penetration of the Arab system is the regional dimension. It is clear in the framework of this system that it is facing regional plans for hegemony from Iran and Turkey. The Iranian plan, has achieved limited results by gaining positions of influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Ali Yunesi, an advisor on minority affairs to President Hasan Rouhani, announced in a forum on Iranian identity that ‘Iran today has become an empire just as it was throughout history and its capital is now Baghdad. It is the centre of our civilization, culture and identity today as it was in the past’. That was a historical reference to the seat of the Persian Sassanian Empire whose control extended over Iraq. This announcement was the object of widespread censure from various Iraqi and other Arab quarters and as usual led to official Iranian statements that it had been misinterpreted.

The Turkish plan is having difficulty being realized but is certainly no less ambitious. In the past, it was dependent on the economic progress Turkey had achieved. That allowed it to penetrate the Arab nation and insert the development of its position towards Israel and the Arab–Israeli conflict. It seems that Turkey, just like Iran, wants to show its overwhelming concern for supporting the Arabs and Palestinians. Now the Turkish plan has added to these pillars its assistance to the Muslim Brotherhood in their attempt to regain power in Egypt. The Brotherhood is also attempting to reach power or take it themselves in other Arab countries, indifferent to how that loses Egypt its central position in the Arab system, and is seeking help from powerful forces in Arab countries. Perhaps another recent addition to the pillars of the Turkish plan is the repeated desire of the new Saudi leader to establish a Sunni alliance in which Turkey would be an essential party. This logic seems to a large extent to be a move from a bad situation to a worse one.

Significantly in this respect, the former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu delivered a speech on the occasion of the anniversary of the Ottoman victory in March 1915 in the Battle of Shana Qala (Janaq Qala’at) against the British and French fleets which were trying to occupy the Turkish straits. The spirit of this speech was not dissimilar to the speech by Ali Yunesi, the Iranian president’s advisor. It dealt with the matter from a religious and Ottoman perspective, focusing on the ‘unity of the destiny of the peoples of the region under Ottoman rule and the divine victory of the army of believers’. Davutoğlu stated that those who were killed in battle among the ranks of the Ottomans had come from Baghdad, Aleppo and Beirut and other parts of the Islamicate world in defence of the capital of the Ottoman caliphate. It is strange that well-known Turkish historians had to remind Davutoğlu that the Arabs had not sent volunteers to take part in the war, that at the time the states of the Levant were suffering the worst period in their history as well and that the Arab youth were forced to fight in the Ottoman army.

We have previously mentioned the American penetration of the Arab system which worsened after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Perhaps what is new in this respect are the weak air attacks by the American-led international alliance against ISIS positions in Iraq and Syria and the occasional American drone attacks on al-Qaeda positions in Yemen. Without doubt and more importantly, however, is an ambiguous American vision that still clings to an essential role in the future of the region for what it calls moderate Islamic leadership. This is reflected in America’s unfriendly position towards the existing regime in Egypt as well as its refusal to support...
the legitimate government in Libya. Moreover, America has been wary of Egypt’s attacks against ISIS positions in Libya after ISIS executed 21 Coptic Egyptian workers there in February 2015. The above analysis of the foreign penetration of the Arab system undoubtedly shows the extent of the hidden danger in the various dimensions of the current Arab scene. This is at least from the viewpoint that solving the present Arab conflicts which are causing the extreme weakness of the Arab system is essentially no longer in the hands of the Arab parties.

The state of the Arab League

It is known that the overriding aim in the process of establishing the Arab League was not to prioritize the realization of unity or integration among the Arab states. Rather, the aim of the League according to Article 2 of its covenant is

the strengthening of the relations between the member-states, the coordination of their political plans in order to achieve cooperation between them and to safeguard their independence and sovereignty; and a general concern with the affairs and interests of the Arab countries.

In accordance with this, the covenant is founded on complete respect for the concept of the member states’ national sovereignty, as shown clearly in the text of Article 7 (prior to its amendment at the Algeria summit in 2005): ‘Unanimous decisions of the Council shall be binding upon all member states of the League; majority decisions shall be binding only upon those states which have accepted them.’ This means that any state which is a member of the League can reject a decision made by all other members and issue its own decision and as that state does not have to adhere to this decision, it loses any value, which has happened in several serious cases.

All of this has led to a growing state of stagnation in the movement of the League as a whole and to some doubting its efficacy and credibility to implement decisions. This current has forced a change to the League’s voting system to prevent member states being able to unilaterally refuse to adhere to the League’s decisions. This caused the Algeria summit in 2005 to amend Article 7 of the covenant relating to the voting system. The significance of this amendment was that originally the method of decision-making aimed to harmonize opinions. That is an obstacle which delays the settling of decisions to the later round. If the subject is of an urgent nature, an extraordinary session is held within one month. If no agreement is reached, then a vote is taken and in this case the decision comes into effect by obtaining the majority of two-thirds of the votes of the states present (this must reach two-thirds of the members for decisions on subjects or the absolute majority on executive decisions, but this amendment has not up to now affected the effectiveness of the League’s decisions).

In order to strengthen the member states’ adherence to implementing decisions, the Algeria summit also adopted a decision to establish an organization to track the implementation of decisions and obligations. This gave the basic system the authority to impose sanctions that began with caution and censure and ended with dropping their membership. The League’s documentation and decisions do no show that those sanctions were activated with regard to any member state despite the frequent phenomenon of non-compliance of many decisions. This reveals a mechanism that is repeated in order to
bury alive the process of developing the League’s system and its performance. When the
time comes to make a decision regarding development, the proposed ideas are agreed
upon and later thwarted as they are referred to committees. The work of these committees
is prolonged for years and then stops instantly when a political conflict occurs between the
member states concerning the details, thus actually putting an end to these ideas.

In fact, the desire for development appeared to have been revived in the League’s cove-
nant at first glance. That was mainly to satisfy the minority current among the League’s
institutions who dream that it will become more united. This is reflected in Article 9 of
the covenant which stipulates that ‘States of the League which desire to establish closer
cooperation and stronger bonds than are provided for by this Charter may conclude agree-
ments to that end’. Similarly Article 19 of the covenant [currently Article 20 after the
addition of a special article to establish the Arab parliament] states that

This Charter may be amended with the consent of two thirds of the states belonging to the
League, in order to make firmer and stronger the ties between the member-states, to create an
Arab Tribunal of Arbitration, and to regulate the relations of the League with any inter-
national bodies to be created in the future to guarantee security and peace.

There were, in fact, several attempts to develop the League by establishing an Arab court of
justice, signing a joint treaty for defence and economic cooperation in 1950, developing a
system of specialized organizations for joint Arab action, establishing a protocol for the
summit rotation and setting up a council for Arab peace and security, the Arab parliament
and other bodies. However, it was clear to those concerned about Arab action that all the
previous attempts had, unfortunately, not led to any specific improvement in the League’s
performance and the system for joint Arab action. Instead, the concept of the united Arab
fighting force which the current Egyptian president proposed in order to confront rising
terrorism in the Arab nation met with opposition from a number of countries. This was
despite the non-compulsory participation in the force and the limitations of national
sovereignty surrounding its work. Nevertheless, the Sharm El-Sheikh summit in March
2015 agreed upon this within a framework of clarifications put forward by the Egyptian
president and in a climate requiring clarification of the need for joint Arab military
action to confront the deteriorating conditions in the Arab nation after operation Decisive
Storm. However, the idea has up to now met the same fate faced by previous ideas for
development, especially the idea of joint Arab leadership confirmed at the Cairo
summit in 1964; there is agreement on the principle, studies are carried out and then
the wheels of implementation are opposed.

This means that the concept of ‘learning’ which is necessary for development has been
absent from the system of Arab collective action. In contrast, the progress of European
integration with the Treaty of Rome in 1957 unified six European states and the European
Union has now integrated 28 states. This has included gradual concessions of successive
parts of the national sovereignty of the member states within the economic sphere. We
find that the system for Arab collective action did not originally follow this practice
and, thus, this system has remained as it is: moving from absolute sovereignty to absolute
sovereignty. However, the members of other social organizations are not connected in the
way that connects the Arab states, and they have gone beyond this concept. It is sufficient
here to mention that the African Union at its first extraordinary summit in 2003 issued the
decision that it enjoys the right to intervention in any member state. This decision was
issued under serious circumstances and prevents any member state in the union from using their lands as a base for destructive actions against other member states.

Thus, the performance of the system of Arab collective action, in general, has been marked by its inability to realize specific achievements over seven decades. This does not mean that it has achieved nothing, but it does mean that the issues of the Arab majority, such as Palestine or Arab economic integration, had varying positions over the decades without any real success. In fact, the status of the Palestinian issue has deteriorated under the burden of Israeli settlement and occupation as we have seen. The status of the system of Arab collective action is attributable to a number of factors. The most important of these include the deep-seated disputes and inter-Arab conflicts that distinguished Arab interactions and often prevented a consensus of opinions among the Arab countries, the erosion or lack of mutual trust among these nations which increased the difficulty of realizing this consensus and the influence of financial centres of power over the League’s decisions. Here we cannot ignore the role of external factors in hindering the progress of Arab collective action. The interests of the regional powers surrounding the Arabs, and thus the big powers, often did not agree that the Arab framework should be the organizing framework of relations between the Arab countries. Hence, the United States and Israel always proposed the Middle Eastern framework to organize the interactions in the Middle East region with its Arab and non-Arab states while Europe proposed the Mediterranean framework. Similarly, Turkey and Iran have been eager in their attempts to penetrate the Arab system and, in this respect, both have realized limited achievements as we have shown.

In view of the developments of the so-called Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria since the end of 2010, in addition to the movements that it was able to bury or adapt with in a number of other Arab countries, the Arab League began to confront challenges of a new kind that emanated from their stumbling attempts at change in a number of countries. Whereas rulers had changed in relative succession, and likewise in a short number of days in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, attempts at change had stumbled and lasted longer in the cases of Yemen, Libya and Syria. That was linked to the widespread violations of human rights by the regimes at which those attempts at change were aimed and it was impossible for the League to do anything in the face of these violations. That strengthened the enormous resolve of a number of Arab governments to remove the Libyan and Syrian regimes due to political considerations that were not necessarily related to human rights.

The Arab League’s current predicament is epitomized by the fact that the international organizations have taken action in accordance with respecting the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of member states, even if this respect has not necessarily been absolute in all instances. It may be said that in the Arab League the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of member states has remained absolutely respected. However, the start of the Arab Spring has seen this principle shaken to some extent. This has worsened due to the threat of terrorism in the Arab nation as a whole. Therefore, the League has found itself compelled to adopt positions on the internal situations in a number of Arab countries that are outside of its usual behaviour in this respect.

Libya was the first case and the worst of its kind. The Arab parliament of the League asked the Security Council to authorize a no-fly zone to protect the opposition forces from the strength of the Gaddafi regime’s military arm in the air and on land. In other
words, the League’s parliament affirmed the necessity of foreign intervention in Libya. However, it entrusted that task to an international organization and did not undertake that itself. This demonstrates the impotence of the Arab organization which is supposed to be the one implementing this intervention as long as it believes that it is necessary. The matter ended with intervention under the pretext of helping the Libyan revolution becoming an intervention by NATO which is inseparable from the conditions it has now caused in Libya. At the same time, the situation matches the catastrophic experience of foreign interventions in the Arab nation, particularly the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is no coincidence that the circumstances in both the cases of Iraq and Libya became such that these states came close to disappearing. This created an ideal climate for terrorism to grow and worsen.

Perhaps the Arab League realized its mistake in the case of Libya and, therefore, distanced itself from requesting international intervention in Syria. However, the degeneration in the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs continued. In an unusual session in November 2011, the League’s parliament issued its decision on a ministerial level relating to the participation of delegations from the Syrian government in meetings of the League’s parliament and all of its institutions. The decision urged the regional and international organizations to recognize the National Coalition of the Syrian revolution and opposition forces as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people’s wishes and to strengthen their connection with this coalition, describing it as the legitimate representative and the main interlocutor with the Arab League. The Baghdad summit of 2012 demanded that the Syrian government immediately cease all its acts of violence and killing as well as protect Syrian civilians, guarantee the freedom to demonstrate, immediately release all those arbitrarily detained, withdraw military forces and arms from Syrian cities and villages and allow Arab and international media free access to all parts of Syria. The Doha summit of 2013 progressed one step further with its decision to invite the National Coalition of the Syrian revolution and opposition forces to occupy the Syrian seat in the League, its parliament and its institutions. This was to be until elections were held that would lead to a coalition government which would take over power in Syria, with this coalition being the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people and the main interlocutor with the Arab League.

Although the political and human motives behind this move are understandable, later developments showed that it was probably too hasty. This was due firstly to the absence of any agreement among the Syrian opposition about who was the most suited among them to represent Syria in the League. Secondly, because of the Syrian regime’s staying power against the forces opposing it and the subsequent developments which demoted the goal of destroying the Syrian regime due to the progress of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, no one could be certain that removing the ruling regime in Syria from its representation in the Arab League and its institutions was the best alternative. Likewise, it was uncertain whether making Syria stay within the League’s framework would make this regime submit to the severe pressure for it to undertake the reforms demanded. That would be in order to come to an agreement either with opposition forces loyal to their nation, and this was perhaps a guarantee for Syria to avoid the disasters facing it now, or with the proposed alternatives to the Syrian regime which might be worse.

In the case of Yemen, it was the ideal situation to go beyond the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs. However, the GCC almost monopolized this intervention,
whether in its diplomatic form (the Gulf initiative) or its military form (operation ‘Decisive Storm’, led by Saudi Arabia), and that was due to the strategic importance of Yemen in the Arab Peninsula. The role of the League was limited to its sanctioning of both forms, excluding itself from any role in calming the situation in Yemen and settling the conflict that had erupted there. The United Nations, meanwhile, is actively trying to do this and change the course of events.

In all of the cases above, attempts at change have been interspersed with the advance of terrorism. However, the events in Iraq which began with the gains achieved by ISIS have reached the point where the group controls areas in both Iraq and Syria and has made attempts to do the same in Lebanon and Libya. Particularly in the cases of Iraq and Lebanon, terrorism emerges by itself, separately from any attempt at change. Therefore, it has become an urgent necessity to decisively confront terrorism. One of the main reasons for its rise is the formation of systems of rule that do not satisfactorily express all of the elements of the political body in these countries. In view of this, the position of the Arab League’s parliament on the developments in Iraq, including ISIS’ announcement of a ‘caliphate’ state, is logical and correct and this is to politely urge the need for a decision on national reconciliation. That is because the League cannot become entangled in the defence of sectarian rule that does not represent all Iraqi groups such that it has made some sectors of Sunni Iraq support ISIS, or at least turn a blind eye to it.

The faltering progress of the Arab League and its organizations is obvious. This is essentially attributable to the victory of national sovereignty over the pan-Arab current in this organization, in addition to the other Arab and international factors previously mentioned. The European Union which began 12 years after the founding of the Arab League now surpasses it although both organizations are almost equal in age. It is noticeable that the crystallization of the model of thwarted development, if we may call it such, begins with the agreement in principle on the idea of development or its plan but afterwards the true intentions appear when the idea or the plan is handed over to a committee for study. This committee is then obstructed in its work, thus expressing the resistance to development in one way or another. Eventually, matters reach a dead end with disagreement over political issues and the countries are asked for their opinions but are slow in disclosing this. If they happen to give a full response, this requires the insertion of amendments to the original idea or plan and it is usually difficult to reconcile these amendments. If these attempts succeed, the idea or plan is accused of lacking homogeneity and this completes the vicious circle that prevents development. This stagnation which has led to a clear weakness has caused the League’s patent confusion in the face of demands for change and its repercussions in the Arab nation.

Conclusions: words about the future

The Arab scene as a whole appears to be drenched in extreme distress and foreboding. This hints at several possible future scenarios, including the feared loss of its integrity which will lead to the Arab system becoming an ugly, fragmented mosaic of different sects, beliefs, ethnicities and races. The cause of this will either be the general failure of modern national state building that takes precedence above citizens’ sense of their primary Arab belonging, despite the passing of over half a century since the independence of most Arab countries. Otherwise, it will be caused by surreptitious foreign plans that aim
to prolong this fragmentation and facilitate the domination and annexation of indeterminable future Arab areas in frameworks that are not Arab, thereby ending the dream of the Arab plan for unity, belonging and justice.

Some speculate that there are other alternative scenarios to this much-feared one. For example, stopping the declining conditions by reaching solutions to the intense and critical conflicts and crises in the Arab nation will allow a gradual return to the natural state of affairs (in other words, floating instead of drowning by perpetuating the weakness as it is). Others see a scenario where one or more Arab powers reinvigorate the task of reform or development to positively influence the circumstances. However, they do not dare to speak about the minimum or medium degree of unity, or even solidarity, required of the Arab scene even in the face of external dangers.

It is not this author’s intention to survey the opportunities available for any of the aforementioned scenarios to take place. The conditions now facing the Arab peoples are new and unexpected in their gravity, not in their nature, and extremely complicated with regard to the actors involved. This author has participated in a number of surveys of this kind and notes, as many others have, that while the efforts exerted in this respect are praiseworthy, they may be wasted due to unanticipated and significant developments. However, this is not a reason for our reluctance to attempt to survey and weigh the various scenarios. Rather, the reason is that we see this as non-essential at a time where there is a danger of suddenly falling down and descending into the depths of the abyss. Therefore, in our opinion, all efforts at this time ought to be directed towards preventing this fall and stopping the descent that is clearly facing us, and not proposing solutions, offering advice or appealing to the regimes because they are either impotent or colluding in this situation.

The Arab peoples have publicly affirmed that they have a will and it is capable of imposing change. Sadly, however, its sacrifices have been in vain. This is evident from the outcome of what began as a revolutionary ‘spring’ and ended as a catastrophe because it lacked an elite capable of leading the masses and steering them onto the correct path. Here we draw attention to the responsibility of the pan-Arabist elite in particular. They should not be content with merely directing censure and condemnation or offering advice and guidance because in doing so they are limiting their historical role for the Arab community. The only acceptable excuse for such a limitation is that they themselves are restoring their unity in preparation for undertaking their pan-nationalist responsibility.

Note

1. The standard definition of the Arab nation or the Arab world (Al-Ummah Al-Arabiyyah) comprises the 22 countries and territories of the Arab League that speak Arabic. These Arab states occupy an area stretching from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Sea in the east, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the north to the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean in the south-east.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Bibliography


