

REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN WEST ASIA AND THEIR RESPONSES TO THE 'ARAB SPRING'

Rubina Pradhan

Research Scholar

Jawaharlal Nehru University

New Delhi, India.

Abstract

The West Asian region has historically been marked with conflict – both inter- and intra-state. More recently, it witnessed large scale peoples' movements against the existing regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya, Syria, etc. that have been collectively described as 'Arab Spring'. It has been marked by political violence and a large number of human casualties. While the UN has closely followed and responded to the recent developments that constitute the 'Arab Spring', regional organizations such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have not had a very significant role in these contemporary developments in the region.

At such a critical juncture, a constructive role of regional organizations in preventing escalation of the crises would be expected. Therefore, it would be interesting to study how regional organizations work in times of conflict and after. The paper would examine West Asian regionalism in general. It would also discuss the development of 2011 'Arab Spring'. Focus will also be on assessing the response of the regional organizations in conflict resolution during the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria at present.

Keywords: *West Asia, regionalism, regional organizations, Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab Spring.*

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Introduction

West Asia is a region which cannot easily be associated with integration and is one of the most fragile zones in the world, troubled by conflicts, crises and constant wars. The regional organizations (ROs) in West Asia seem to have a small role to play when it comes to conflict resolution in the region. The members lack a common interest and have weak and ineffective institutions that make it difficult to address crises effectively. This ineffectiveness was reflected in the Arab Spring that started in 2011. Some of the older conflicts in the region like the Arab-Israeli crisis (identity crisis) that took root way back in 1948 are still blazing, while the political revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen have more recently erupted. "The overthrow of the Iraqi regime in 2003 has left a power vacuum which is yet to be filled" (Annawitt 30).

Regional Organization in West Asia: The Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council

The West Asian region is a vital area in terms of natural resources (mainly oil) which are found in abundance and which also attract the interest of outside powers in the internal politics of the region. Although the study is located in West Asia, it spills over to include North Africa in so far as North African states are also members of the Arab League. Further, the Arab Spring, which is the main focus of the study, started in the North African region. Organizations like the League of Arab States (Arab League) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which are the most prominent organizations in the region, have been inactive in the matters of regional unrest until recently when uprisings started in places like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, when they started to participate.

The Arab League

In the long history of the Arab world, the Arab League is a stage in a series of developments which has not ended as yet as has been pointed out by Hourani (125). "On September 25th 1944, a Preparatory Committee (Pact) composed of the delegates of the Arab states met in Alexandria to work out a scheme acceptable to all states" (Aziz 487). The result that came out was the Alexandria Protocol that was signed on October 7, 1944. Some states agreed on surrendering their sovereignty while others like Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and Yemen rejected any suggestions related to it.

Various drafts were signed which was finally approved and Arab league was formed on March 22nd 1945 (Aziz 488-90). It included the representatives of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria,

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Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Presently it consists of 22 states along with the 7 founding members: Libya, Sudan, Morocco and Tunisia, Kuwait, Algeria, Oman, Qatar and UAE, Mauritania, Somalia and the State of Palestine, Djibouti and Comoros (Arab League official website). The observer countries include Brazil, Eritrea, India and Venezuela.

Preference to national interests over Arab interest has been a common phenomenon which is also a reason for the Arab League to become a less effective organization in the region.

The recent uprising in the Arab world popularly known as ‘Arab Spring’, in a way has given a platform to the Arab League to emerge as an active organization in the region. Though there are various limitations for ROs like Arab League to establish itself as an effective organization, its relevance in regional geopolitics has increased post 2011.

The Gulf Cooperation Council

The formation of GCC has been a unique model in the entire West Asian region. The significance of the Persian Gulf on the international level as the reservoir of energy resources has increased for global stability and development. Oil and gas being the world’s most needed resources, states try to acquire it at large. With GCC’s position in the international arena, it has no less challenges and obstacles. Many outside powers like UK and US have a profound influence and interest in the Gulf because of the resources. Hence, any conflict in the region or any regional disturbance would greatly destabilize the region as well as international system.

The unstable environment in the Persian Gulf during the 1980s led the states of the Persian Gulf to a decision to institutionalize their cooperation to deal with common security challenges and enter into a process of economic integration (Bojarczyk 70-71). Therefore, the Gulf Cooperation Council was established on 25th May 1981 in Riyadh by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and UAE (GCC official website, accessed 31st October 2014).

The puzzle remains that in spite of enormous wealth it has not been able to build an integrated regional defense force for security of the region. Though in comparison to other ROs, GCC have responded more efficiently to the crisis and have reached a level of success, still there are certain internal and external factors that restrict GCC from achieving regional integration.

‘Arab Spring’ and the Responses of the Regional Organizations

The Arab Spring is historic not only in the politics of West Asia but also for the entire world, as it affected the whole world either directly or indirectly. People used internet as the ideologically neutral organizing tool for spreading the revolution to different parts of the world. Some of the important factors for such widespread awakening or mass mobilization were a “lack of freedom and democracy, low economic and social indicators, etc.” (Samad01).

Arab Spring—An Overview

‘Arab Spring’ refers to a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across West Asia North Africa or the Arab World in late 2010 and early 2011 (Manfreda web).

The modus operandi of most of the revolutions or national uprisings bears similar characteristics. For instance, the demonstrations were driven mostly by younger citizens, made use of media and social networking sites such as facebook, twitter and YouTube, and were essentially grass-roots movements. There are, however, also distinctions in the revolutionary processes in different Arab states. In some countries, the military defected from the existing regime—forexample: in Tunisia and Egypt and in some; the military remained loyal to the President like in Libya, Yemen and Syria. Some parts were liberated by the rebels – Tahrir Square in Cairo, Pearl Square in Manama, University Quarter in Sanaa and incase of Libya, the whole country (Rogan 04). The authority in Syria has with an iron fist prevented protestors from protesting against the government and toppling Assad’s regime down. Though each uprising was a domestic and internal affair, there has been the involvement of regional organizations in some way or the other to put an end to the conflict. In fact, the role of United Nations as an external actor in the region is very important.

The self-immolation of Tunisian vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi sparked off the Arab Spring on 17th December 2010 (Rosiny 01). A wave of protests swept across Tunisia, Egypt and Libya within a few months. Later on, the protests spread also to Syria. These states had been under authoritarian rule for years and were largely resistant to democratization. The ruling governments had different approach to responding to the situation. “In February 2011, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt resigned after the protests at Tahrir Square, ending his 30 year-rule” (Rozsa, Bhagat, Boskin, et al.01). The Libyan case was controversial as well as historic. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown after massive domestic revolts and an international military intervention led by NATO. The NATO forces, on 20 October 2011, killed him in an encounter. In Yemen, Abdal Rabah Mansour Al Hadi formally replaced President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012 (Rozsa, Bhagat, Boskin, et al01). Protests still continue in the southern part of Yemen for self-determination and equality of Yemeni population (Rozsa, Bhagat, Boskin, et al. 02). The protest in Bahrain aimed at achieving greater political freedom and equality for the majority Shia population. This attempt was initially crushed with the help of the sub-regional organization, the Gulf Co-operation Council, militarily led by Saudi Arabia (Rozsa, Bhagat, Boskin, et al. 09-10). The crushing of the protests in Bahrain led by Saudi Arabia shows the influence of the regional hegemon in the region, which also guides the policy preferences of the member countries within the organization. The on-going protests in Syria which began in March 2011 demanding the ousting of President Bashar-Al-Assad, have rapidly developed into a nationwide uprising and the repercussion is being felt all over the world with increasing humanitarian crisis.

Responses of the Arab League and the GCC

Since the unfolding of the events in West Asia, the important regional organizations in West Asia - Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council had a limited response towards Arab Spring. Any responses by the ROs during and after the uprising were made in collaboration with the UN.

The UN as a general purpose international organization made several efforts for peaceful settlement and to end the crisis in the conflict zone.

As protests spread from Tunisia to other cities in West Asia-North Africa, the GCC emerged as the only organization to act as a cohesive bloc of Arab states. The GCC states' response was multi-dimensional focussing on the next emerging unrest in Bahrain, Libya and Yemen while at the same time pumping billions of dollars into their own society to neutralize unrest (Weitzman 72). When the Uprising started in Bahrain which is also the member of GCC, it was viewed by Saudi Arabia as a religious-communal struggle rather than a civic assertion as it was seen by the West (Weitzman 72). The King of Bahrain, Hamad welcomed the deployment of “approximately 1000 (mostly Saudi) armed forces along with smaller contingents from other GCC states” (Weitzman 73). The large forces cracked down on the protestors which brought the protests to the end.

In case of Yemen, “the removal of King Saleh and his replacement by his Vice President was the only option for GCC as well as the Arab League as their purpose was to stabilize Yemen” (Weitzman 73). Resolution 2014 passed by the UN Security Council on 21 October 2011, welcomed the activities of the GCC and its engagement for supporting Security Council in its efforts to reduce the political crisis in Yemen. On 23 September 2011, GCC called for immediate signing by President Saleh and implementation of the GCC initiative. The Security Council also welcomed GCC's commitment to the formation of the Commission to investigate the events which led to the killing of Yemeni citizens (S/RES/2051). The GCC as well as the Arab League wanted to cripple Qaddafi's rule in Libya which was very different from their action in Bahrain and Yemen.

On 22 February 2011, the Arab League condemned the Libyan government's violent crackdown of the protestors and also suspended it from participating in Arab League meetings and other activities of the League (Weitzman 73). Doha and Riyadh made the Arab League pass a resolution calling on UNSC to impose a no-fly zone to protect the citizens (Weitzman 74).

The UNSC approved a “no-fly zone” over Libya on March 17th 2011 and authorized all necessary measures to protect the civilians (S/RES/1973). The UNSC also authorized the member states that have notified the Secretary General of the UN and the Secretary General of the Arab League, acting nationally or through regional arrangements to take all necessary measures to enforce compliance with the ban on flights (S/RES/1973). Qatar and UAE helped NATO with their small contingents from their respective air forces to lead attacks on Qaddafi's forces. The UNSC was not unanimous; those who did not vote in favour of Resolution 1973 for international intervention were Syria, Algeria, Sudan and Mauritania (Weitzman 74).

The Syrian uprising is the one that has made Arab League more active in the region. It has started to act on bringing about political solutions to regional conflicts. The new Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi condemned foreign intervention in Syria and urged the government to end its violent repression of the opposition (Weitzman 76). The Syrian Government's failure to stop violence led the Arab League to suspend Syria from its activities on

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November 2012 (Bhardwaj 87). The Arab League also approved unforeseen economic and political sanctions. Notwithstanding these harsh conditions, Syria agreed to receive the Arab Military mission. The 165 member mission was led by a retired Sudanese General but numbers of monitors of the mission were attacked by the pro-regime elements (Weitzman 76-77). The operation closed down because the GCC forces were withdrawn from Syria followed by Jordan's withdrawal. This operation failed to stop the fighting and the bloodshed continued. The Arab League then called for a joint Arab-UN Peacekeeping force and Saudi leaders favoured to arm the Syrian opposition pressuring Assad to step down.

The UN Secretary General, Ban ki Moon sent his predecessor Kofi Annan to Damascus as UN-Arab envoy to settle the dispute and come to a solution (Weitzman 76). He came up with a six point peace plan for Syria which was never fulfilled. On the other hand the GCC states called on the international community to take quick and firm action to stop the violence and torture of the Syrian people.

Despite the above efforts made by the UN and the Regional Organizations, the situation in Syria is worsening day by day with no consensus on settling the crisis and human rights violation. The same worsening situation can be apprehended in Libya and other parts of West Asia which is a challenge to ROs in the region.

Challenges to Effective Regional Organizations in West Asia

According to Legrenzi and Harders (01), the regional co-operative efforts in West Asia are very difficult to study because of certain underlying constraints viz.: 1) institutional shortcomings 2) domestic constraints and 3) international intervention. These factors are responsible for causing unrest in the Arab world which is a constraint in achieving regional cohesion. In spite of common culture, language, religion and geographical proximity, the region lacks cohesion. Conflicts, weak institutions, internal factions in the region are due to the intervention by the external players, asymmetrical economic integration mostly with US and Europe and balance of power politics (Harders and Lerenzi 02). Fawcett and Nonnemann as cited in Lerenzi and Harders (02) argue that there is a dominance of national interest rather than cooperation interest, and has limited orientation towards reforming the regime and making an effective institution (Harders and Lerenzi 02).

Domestic constraints are major hurdles for the attainment of any regional initiatives. The policy of the governments elites to maximize and retain their sovereignty at the expense of peoples' participation and regional integration have severely hampered the development of regional conflict management mechanisms. Another challenge is the lack of strong states as there seems to be no proper institution for checking the activities of states nor does any RO have effective mechanism to settle the crises or to supervise the activities of the member states. After the uprising of 2011 that swept the Arab world, the occurrence of transparent, democratic

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elections, along with the demand for democracy, became likely to exert pressure on new governments to implement reforms (Legrenzi and Calulli04-05).

Arab regional organizations and regionalism do not provide collective security nor do they fulfil their objectives of economic integration as laid down in the charter. Arab Spring has brought into focus the need for improving the socio-economic condition and ensuring political stability in the region. This would be a fundamental prerequisite for regional cooperation in West Asia.

Conclusion:

Looking at the above uprisings and the crises that the countries faced and are facing, it is evident that the regional organizations in West Asia should have acted more vibrantly. The ROs should continue to monitor and mediate the unfolding of the events in West Asia which has always remained vulnerable. It should devise a post regime change contingency plans to secure the countries from further escalation of the conflict (Berti and Friedman 117). The emerging new political scenarios in West Asia and North Africa have begun to impact the stagnant Regional Organizations like Arab League. The Arab League has started to depart from its old tradition of non-interference in the internal affairs of its member states to adopting universal values of human rights. It has now started playing an active role in the regional politics of West Asia-North Africa.

Regional organizations today have grown both in numbers and scope but their role as conflict managers is not easy to understand. Hanseem, Mitchell and Nemeth (20-27) are of the opinion that unless international organizations are highly institutionalized, they cannot be successful in mediating conflict resolution. The urgent requirement of the region is to set up mechanisms or rules of behavior for its states to allow for dialogue and cooperation in political and security issues ignoring the differences for regional stability. The successful democratic transition of post Arab Spring nations will be an incentive for increased regional cooperation in West Asia. The mutual distrusts between the regimes and their citizens and between regimes themselves should be reduced. As long as this remains, regionalism in the region will be just a symbolic issue. Regional peace and stability will enhance the chances for inter-Arab cooperation and well-established ROs.

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