



## Restoration of Peace & Stability in Fractured Arab Societies

by Christopher Benoit  
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### Introduction

With a modern regional history dominated through the Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Centuries by foreign colonialism and rule through local proxies, the Arabic-speaking states of the Middle East emerged from the two world wars determined to assert greater independence. The Ottoman Turkish Empire, which ruled much of the region for over five-hundred years, lost control in the wake of World War One. France and the United Kingdom emerged as the major foreign powers in Turkey's place. Italy seized Libya as a colony and used the country as a battleground for the North African theatre of the Second World War.

With these problems of anti-colonialism in mind, the League of Arab States was formed on 22 March 1945 by 22 Arabic speaking states of the region with the initial aims of freeing countries from colonial rule and the preventing the creation of a Jewish state. The League of Arab States is seven months older than the United Nations, which was not formally brought into existence until 24 October 1945, and six years older than the European Union, which came into existence in 1951 as the European Coal and Steel Community.

Now one of the wealthiest regions of the world—the beneficiary of immense oil wealth—but also home to many desperately poor countries, as well as a rapidly growing population and conflicting demands for political stability and change, the Arab League must balance seemingly irreconcilable pressures. Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, countering Israel's regional power has been the most visible goal of the Arab League, one goal that its highly diverse membership could agree on. But since the Arab Spring that swept the

region in 2011, toppling several states and threatening many others, the organization has been forced to look inward. Preserving the stability of existing governments, safeguarding them against regional threats, and restoring the stability of shattered states of Libya, Syria and Yemen are now leading goals for the Arab League.

The goals of the Arab League now are centered on uniting the member states and combat divisiveness between constituents and achieving collective security. This is seen through the agreement on *Joint Defence and Economic Cooperation*, which is the joint coordination of military defense measures and a voluntary Joint Arab Force created to combat extremism. Yet, even these simple aims have found impediments. With the 2011 uprisings, Syria has found itself suspended due to government repression during the Syrian Civil War. There is still tension from previous Western-aligned and Soviet aligned states from the Cold War as well as hostilities between traditional monarchies (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco) and 'Revolutionary' republics, particularly Egypt under Nasser, Baathist Syria and Iraq, and Libya under Muammar Gaddafi.<sup>1</sup> There is also division regarding the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003; some states back the charge, while others oppose, and the rest waiver. Due to this disunity among the member states, and resolutions only applying to those whom actually sign, the ineffectuality to change and stabilize major countries in the region--specifically Libya, Syria, and Yemen--seems staggering.

In the face of this seemingly hopeless situation, the League has shown promise at lower governmental levels by forming general school

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<sup>1</sup> News, BBC. "Profile: Arab League." BBC News.



curricula, preserving ancient texts, and creating a regional telecommunications union, which indicates that there is still hope for this regional institution.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not Arab nations can take back leadership over the region's political development is a question that only the Arab League can answer.

## Background

While the countries in question--Libya, Syria, and Yemen--could have their current chaotic status traced back decades, the most defining year in history for the entire region was 2011--The Arab Spring--where the nature of the ruling class would finally be challenged and when changes in norms would be brought about. It began December 17, 2010 in Tunisia with the self-immolation of fruit cart owner Mohamed Bouazizi, stirring protests and riots across the country that spread throughout the Arab World. The ideals of the young being oppressed by the regimes above them, being unfairly treated and taxed, and suppressing of rights and voices came to a head. While many countries remained as non-violent demonstrations that dissipated in 2012 or later, Libya, Syria, and Yemen converted into full insurgencies and, ultimately, a civil war.

### *The Libyan Revolution*

The Libyan Revolution was an armed conflict in 2011 between forces loyal or opposed to the authoritarian government of Muammar Gaddafi of the Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. After pro-Qaddafi forces threatened the eastern half of the country with a humanitarian catastrophe, the air forces of several Nato countries, led by France, Italy, the

United Kingdom and United States, intervened to help the rebels overthrow Qaddafi. They succeed in October 2011.

Working with guidance from the United Nations, the rebel forces established an opposing government called the "National Transitional Council" (NTC), the body recognized by the international community as the legitimate governing force of Libya, situated around the Eastern second largest city of Libya: Benghazi.<sup>3</sup> The fighting in the city of Sirte on 20 October 2011, with the capture of the town and the death of Colonel Gaddafi. But the war was not followed by stability.

Today the country is divided into two approximate halves, an internationally recognized government in the East and another government based in Tripoli in the west. Intermittent fighting occurs routinely. In lieu of government authority, groups of former rebels now control cities and countryside. The Islamic State has been able to control a small part of the country as well. The chaos in Libya makes central rule impossible, preventing a return to normal and economic development. Instead the country has become a base for petroleum and weapons smuggling, human trafficking of migrants from Africa and the Middle East.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

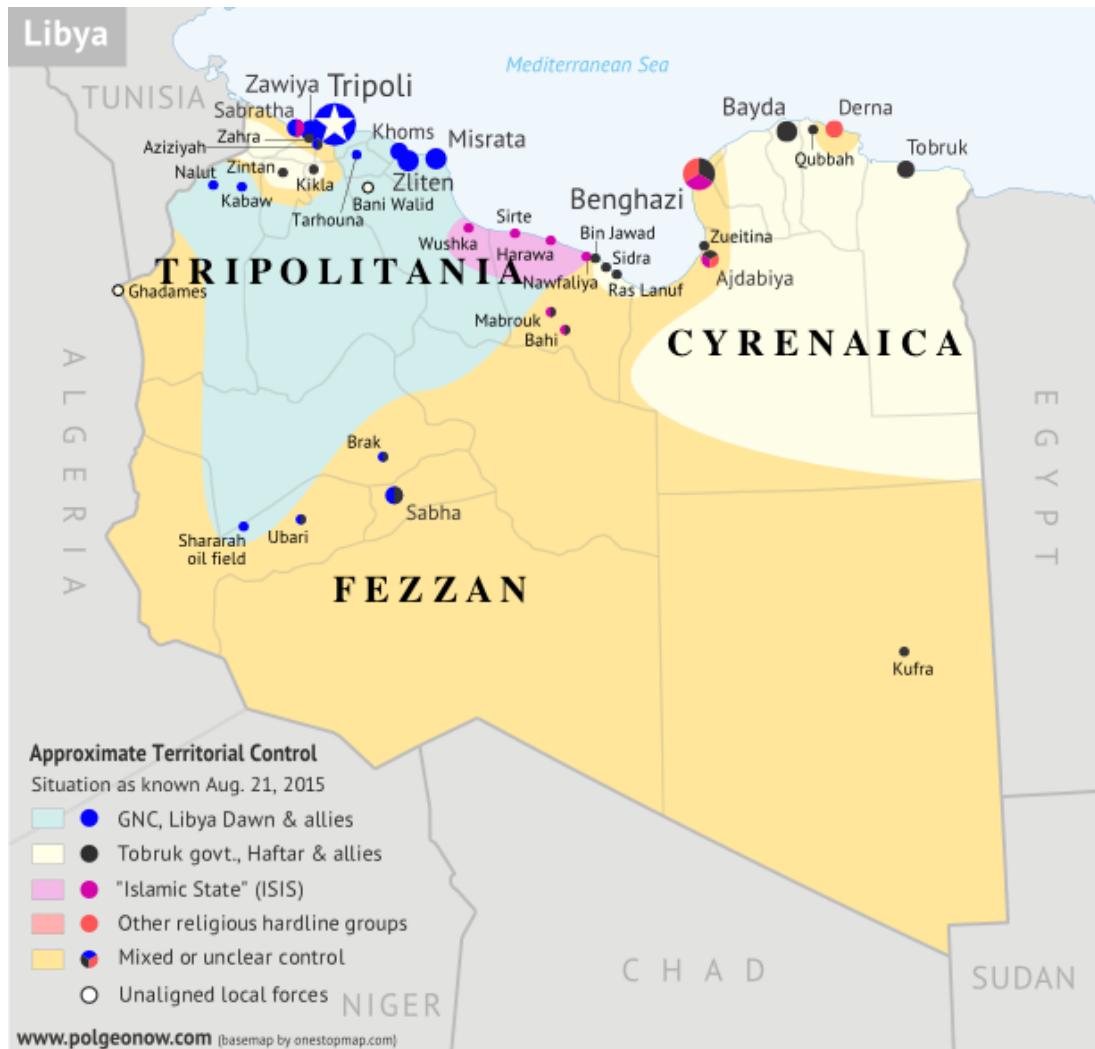
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<sup>3</sup> "NTC Libya." NTC Libya.



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### *The Syrian Uprising*

Like Libya, the current conflict in Syria was a series of protests during The Arab Spring in 2011. It was comprised of massive public demonstrations against the oppressive Ba'athist government of Bashar al-Assad. The protests were met with police and military resistance, resulting in hundreds of deaths, but when it

became clear the denied citizens of Syria would not halt their protesting, Assad deployed ground troops to enforce military law. When Mubarak fell in Egypt on 11 February, a sign was painted under a bridge in Damascus:

انها دورك، طيب



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'Now it's your turn, doctor', referring to Assad's previous profession.<sup>4</sup>

On 29 July 2011, the rebel Free Syrian Army was created, and the ongoing Syrian Civil War began in earnest.

Since then many other rebel forces have entered the conflict, including Sunni Muslim groups with support from the Gulf Arabs and sometimes the United States, Kurds with support from the United States, the Syrian Government in Damascus supported by Iran and Russia, and Turkey fighting for its own interests in the north of Syria.

### *The Yemeni Revolution*

As mentioned above, a popular uprising spirit against despots spread throughout the Arab World culminated to the point where the people of Yemen called for President Ali Abdullah Saleh Al-Sanhani Al-Humairi (Sālih) to step down amidst cries and protests for greater democracy, shunning his perpetuation of poverty and corruption. The opposition was organized, and Salih made several concessions, including empty promises to step down, of what he has done and reneged several times before and during the Revolution. The protests and violence came to a head on March 18, when Salih loyalists open fired on protesters in Sanaa, killing at least 50 people. This event lost Salih much support; several members of government resigned, including the Major-General of the army and his command after he swore to protect the protesters. With military opposition growing, Salih deployed armaments and troops around Sanaa to keep the city. A bomb went off on June 3rd in the presidential palace, and Salih was transported to Saudi Arabia, leaving vice president Hadi in command; later in February 2012, the presidential power would be signed

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<sup>4</sup> "Graffiti Wars and Syria's Spray Man." Al Akhbar English.

over to him.<sup>5</sup> By then, the war had already begun, as rebel Houthi militants swept from the north of the country and conquered much of the eastern part of Yemen.

### **Current Situation**

The revolutionary time in the Arab world known as The Arab Spring began, and all but ended, in 2011, with many of the less volatile uprisings in Arab States leading to change or petering out. The conflict that continues in a number of Arab countries is considered part of an "Arab Winter," a cold that spreads across Libya, Syria, and Yemen, marked by continuing civil wars, sectarian strife, and sustained instability.<sup>6</sup>

### *Second Libyan Civil War*

There has been conflict in Libya since the liberation from Gaddafi in 2011, escalating to skirmishing Islamists and Nationalists. It is centered mostly between the internationally recognized Libyan Government, the Tobruk government of 2014, and the Islamist government of the General National Congress (GNC). The Tobruk government is strongest in Eastern Libya where the NTC was based, finding support with the army as well as air strikes from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Brokered by the UN, the two opposing governments were to form the General National Accord, a government made by concessions of either side, which was signed but not followed by the Islamist group.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Yemen Uprising of 2011-12." Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

<sup>6</sup> "The Arab Winter." The Economist. January 09, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> "Libya's Self-declared National Salvation Government Stepping down." Reuters.



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The GNC rejects the elections of 2014 and is supported by the Islamist Libya Dawn and aided by Qatar, Sudan, and Turkey.<sup>8</sup> There is also Benghazi in the east, under the control of Islamist Ansar al Sharia, battling the nationalist militia, as well as the Islamic State taking a Libyan Province, and other militia groups. A wider scope of Libya is seeing as it as a proxy war between the Gulf States of Qatar and UAE, possibly halting any progress.

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen, Chris. "War in Libya - the Guardian Briefing." The Guardian.



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### *Syrian Civil War*

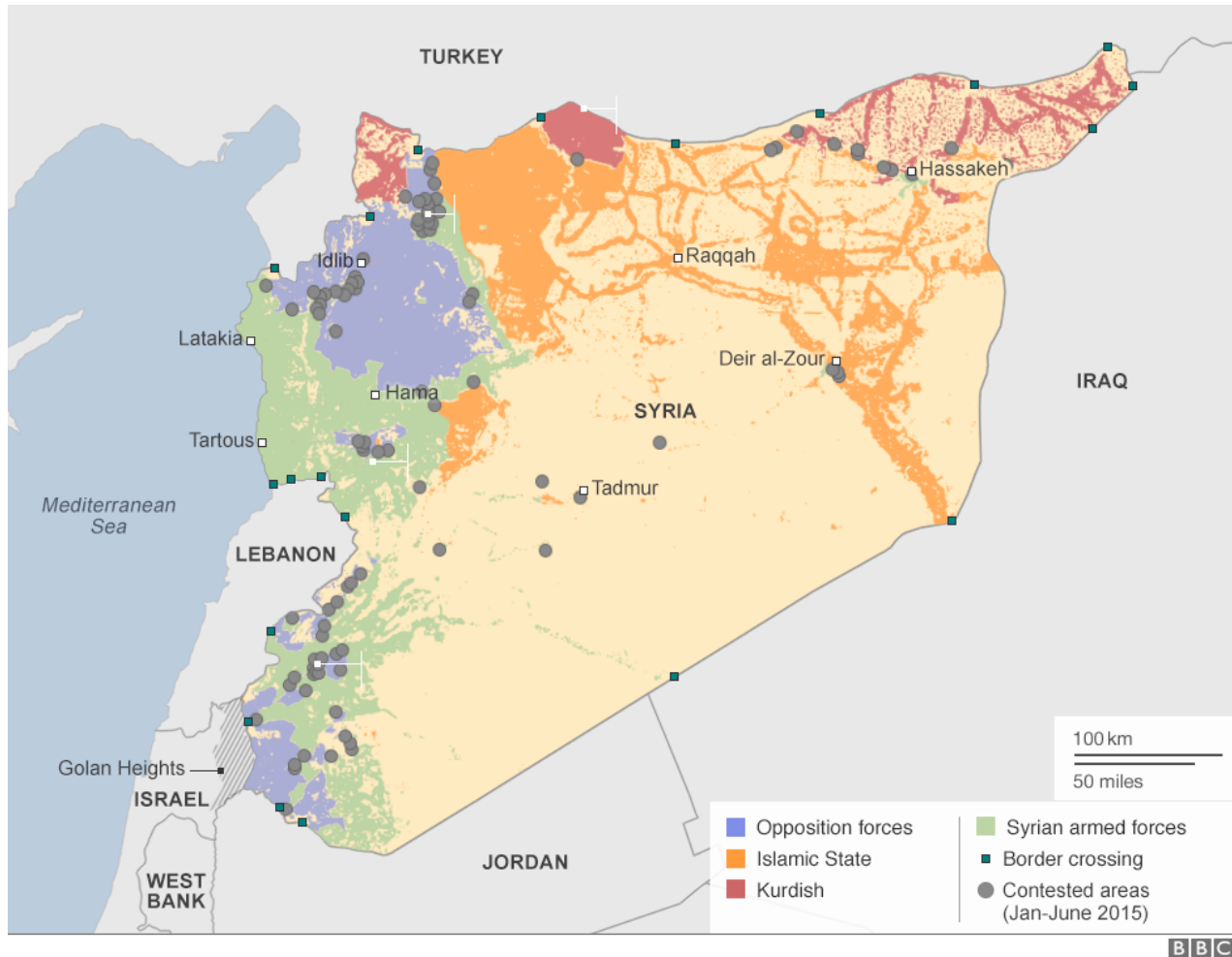
The Syrian Civil War is one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history, with more than 250,000 killed and half the prewar population of Syria forced from their homes. The war is characterized with changes in territorial control between the Assad Regime, the opposition force of the Free Syrian Army, as well as extremist Islamist groups like Islamic State (Daesh) making waves all their own. The birth city of the revolution, Homs, has fallen back into regime control. The capital Damascus is constantly under contention, with the government holding the core while Rebels fighting in the outskirts, finding resistance from new barriers as well as the Islamic State. Aleppo, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the remaining Rebel strongholds, has been under siege since July 2012 from both the Regime and Jihadists.

The picture to the right shows Aleppo, before the war and today. This is the world's biggest and foremost displacement crisis, with roughly seven million forced from their homes but still in country (internally displaced people, IDPs), and four million having fled into other countries (becoming formal refugees). Turkey and Lebanon have each taken in more than one million Syrians, while Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt have become home to hundreds of thousands more.





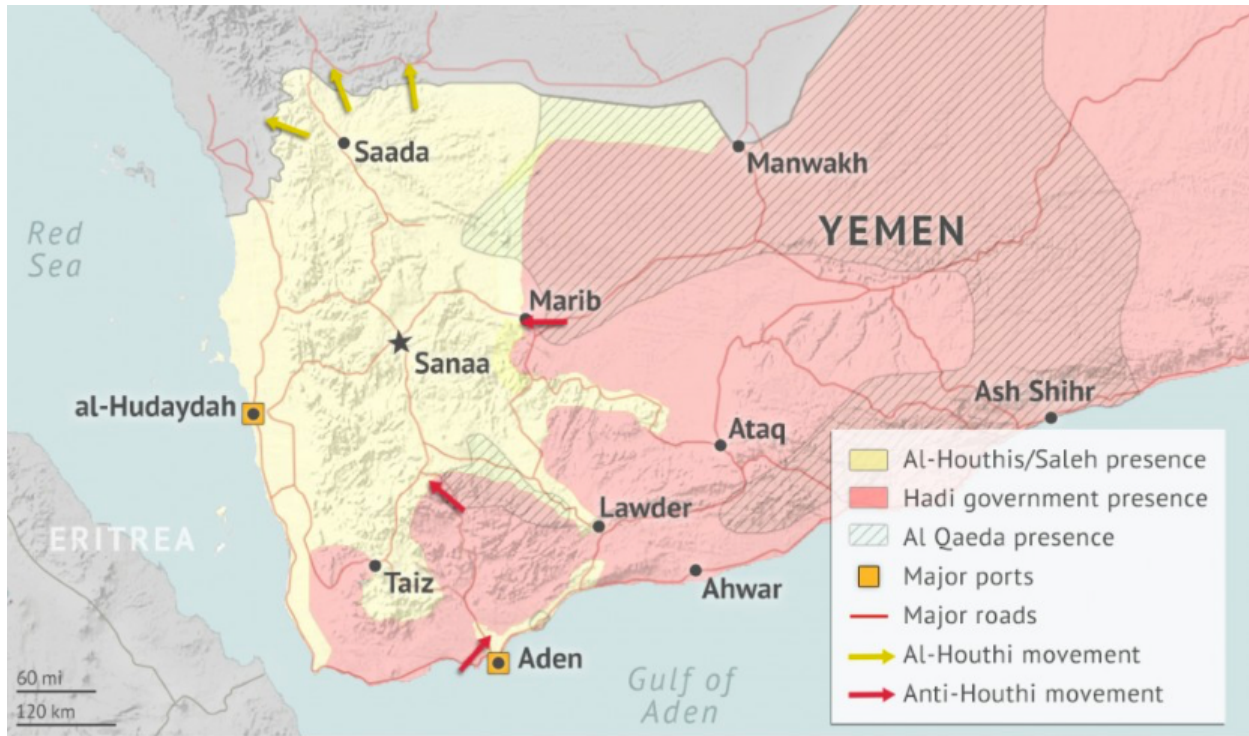
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The Syrian situation is also under scrutiny in the international community as a possible proxy war, with the United States and its Arab Gulf allies backing the rebel forces with aid and airstrikes, and Russia and Iran backing President Assad under the guise of attacking Islamic militants.



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## Yemeni Civil War

Yemen is now one of the Arab World's poorest countries, devastated by civil war between forces loyal to the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and those allied to the Houthi rebel movement, the champions of the Shi'ite Muslim minority.<sup>9</sup> The conflict began with the failed transition of power that did not bring any state stability, with attacks from al-Qaeda, separatists in the south, militants loyal to Saleh, and corruption, unemployment and food insecurity derailing the government acquisition by Hadi. This conflict has killed over 6,800 and injured over 35,000, as yet another proxy conflict, with a Saudi Arabia led coalition that backs president Hadi, pushing airstrikes against the Iranian

backed Houthis. President Hadi has been able to take control in the city of Aden, and trying to rename it as the capital, unable to remove the pro-government forces from Sanaa, and Islamists of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State taking the south.

The UN estimates that 3.1 million Yemenis are internally displaced, while 14 million people are suffering from food insecurity and 370,000 children under the age of five are at risk of starving to death. More than 1,900 of the country's 3,500 health facilities are also currently either not functioning or partially functioning, leaving half the population without adequate healthcare.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> News, BBC. "Yemen Crisis: Who Is Fighting Whom?" BBC News.

<sup>10</sup> News, BBC. "Yemen Crisis: Who Is Fighting Whom?" BBC News.





## Role of the Arab League and United Nations

While cooperation between the member states of The Arab League, as well as the international intervention of the United Nations has led to a few agreements, they have met greater roadblocks. There has been some coordination, such as the previous head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, believed in a United Nations resolution authorizing attacks on Libyan air defenses, but that Arabs did not want military strikes by Western powers that hit civilians when the League called for a no-fly zone over Libya.<sup>11</sup> The internationally recognized Government of National Accord was the product of a UN led process, but continually struggles to establish legitimacy and a measure of control beyond the capital.<sup>12</sup> This shows how there is progress, but room to grow for in the coordination of states in The Arab League to overcoming regional obstacles.

### *Landmark UN Resolutions*

While the Arab League leans towards internal solutions, there have been a few instances of outsider action when crisis grew too great. Adopting resolution 1973 (2011) by a vote of 10 in favor to none against, the United Nations Security Council authorized Member States, acting nationally or through regional organizations or arrangements, to take all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack in the country. This resolution included Benghazi but excluded foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory — requesting the Member States to immediately inform the Secretary-General of such measures.<sup>13</sup> In Yemen, Mr.

Hadi's government says the political process can only proceed if UN Security Council resolution 2216, which calls for the rebels to withdraw from all areas they control and lay down their arms, is fully implemented.<sup>14</sup> There are ongoing talks by the UN regarding Syria, mostly from the pretense of humanitarian aid and refugee resettlement

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<sup>11</sup> News, BBC. "Arab League 'united' over Libya Action - BBC News." BBC News.

<sup>12</sup> "The Current Situation in Libya." United States Institute of Peace.

<sup>13</sup> "Security Council Approves 'No-Fly Zone' over Libya, Authorizing 'All Necessary Measures' to

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Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases." UN News Center.

<sup>14</sup> News, BBC. "Yemen Crisis: Who Is Fighting Whom?" BBC News.



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### Country Positions

*Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman* constitute a bloc of moderate Arab monarchies. Their policies stress cooperation with each other and outside powers who can balance the region, especially the United States. Their greatest concern is the spread of revolutionary chaos to large countries like Saudi Arabia, and the rise of Iranian influence. Kuwait has led the region with democratic reforms.

*North African* members of the Arab League are divided between more radical states like Sudan, and more cautious actors like Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. The latter generally favor measures to reduce the fighting, but strongly oppose accommodation with rebels groups favored by other Arab governments. They tend to view Islamists as threats to political stability rather than moral warriors.

*Saudi Arabia:* Leads a coalition of Persian Gulf Arab states that have intervened in regional conflicts. This coalition favor Muslim Sunnis, providing them with financial support and armaments. In Libya and Syria the so-called Gulf Arabs (especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates or UAE) have been especially active, with high level support from the royal families, as as popular support flowing to Sunni causes. The block is especially concerned with opposing Iranian efforts to gain influence by supporting Shi'ite interests in the region, especially in eastern Saudi Arabia (the oil rich part of the country, also largely Shi'ite in population) and Iraq, as well as Lebanon and Yemen. Iran also support the government of Syria, ruled by the Alawite minority.

*Russia:* Not an Arab league member, Russia is a force to be considered never-the-less. Russia has

been continually trying to get the Rebels in Syria placed on the UN Terrorist list while continually backing President Assad with airstrikes in the country on the rebels under the guise of fighting against radical terrorism. Russia and Iran, however, are strong backers of the Syrian president and have been accused of targeting moderate opposition forces, some of whom are supported by Washington and Gulf Arab states.<sup>15</sup> Internally, there is much divisiveness on how to settle issues of this magnitude, such as Oman being the only country of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council that is not part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.<sup>16</sup>

*The United States:* Also a non-members, the United States continually partners with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states in the region. But the United States is not trusted by most Arab League members, because of its intimate relationship with Israel. US Secretary of State John Kerry met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud for talks on the fighting in Syria, Libya, and Yemen that have been ravaged by violence in recent years. Since the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2013, the United States has been especially active helping regional governments fight its spread. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia, along with a number of other Western countries, Persian Gulf monarchies and Turkey back rebel groups fighting against Assad in Syria.<sup>17</sup> The U.S. has provided logistical and intelligence support to a Saudi-led coalition of nine Arab countries in their bombing and ground

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "John Kerry and Saudi King Discuss Libya, Syria and Yemen Conflicts - Libyan Express." Libyan Express. August 25, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Dailymail.com, Hannah Parry For. "Secretary of State John Kerry Meets with King of Saudi Arabia to Discuss Efforts to End Conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen." Mail Online.



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offensive against Shiite Houthi rebels and their allies in Yemen.<sup>18</sup>

to focus instead on the social problems that caused the revolutions in the first place what must be initially addressed?

### Essential Issues and Choices

Can the sharply divided Arab League unite for common action on regional conflicts? In the past, it was easiest to agree on measures against Israel, regarded as a foreign threat oppressing the Arab breather, the Palestinians. But regional warfare today poses much greater challenges to the relevance of the Arab League, with sharp divisions among its membership, who look forward to radically different outcomes. Unless these differences can be overcome, the Arab League will risk irrelevance. How can the organization come together as a council to tackle these issues?

Choices like these cannot be easy. All require serious negotiations and difficult compromises between ideals and practicalities. Whether the Member States of the Arab League can achieve so much remains to be seen.

- Can the Arab League create a joint military force to intervene in one or more of these conflicts? Or is the risk of further engagement too severe?
- Would it be safer to follow a more cautious course and unite on diplomatic initiatives, engaging foreign sponsors of the fighting sides to achieve a lasting peace?
- Or should the Arab League welcome further foreign intervention to solve regional problems, whether from the United Nations, or outside powers like the European Union, Russia and United States?
- Should Arab League member states focus instead on their domestic situations, to ensure the survival of their own governments?
- Is peace and security in these warring countries what must be tackled first, or does it make more sense for their leaders

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<sup>18</sup> "John Kerry and Saudi King Discuss Libya, Syria and Yemen Conflicts - Libyan Express." Libyan Express.



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