

The Arab League's Decision-making System and Arab Integration

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the function of the Arab League decision-making system and its influences on the Arab integration from the perspective of institutionalism and integration theory. Arab League makes its decisions on the basis of cooperation and negotiations. Theoretically, only in some policy fields where cooperation outperforms unilateral action, can such a decision institution lead to mutual policies and unanimous actions. However, practically, this system lacks efficient operations on the regional level. Even in the fields of economy or security, where member states share more mutual interests, the integrative cooperation of the Arab League is confined to the limited policy framework, with minimum agreements as its outcome. Experience from the Europe Union suggests that there must be a supra-national institution to propose draft, supervise the development and implementation of the policies, and regulate the behaviors of relevant nations. The integrative direction and outlook of Arab League depends exactly on its future decision-making system.*

Key Words: *Arab League; Decision-making System; European Union; Middle East International Organizations; Regional Integration*

The pan-Arab integration has been developing under the framework of the League of Arab States (thereinafter referred to as the Arab League or the League) since 1945, making every effort to promote the interests of the Arab world in political, economic, military, security and cultural fields. Judging from the outcome, however, the degree of Arab integration is undoubtedly far from enough.² Many scholars ascribed such under-integration to political or economic conflicts, wrestling between member states, and interferences from other power states. But they hardly noticed the negative influences of the decision-making system of the Arab League on the integration progress.

As is well known, the construction of a system is omnipresent throughout the whole integrating progress, permeating through the design and implementation of every rule and regulation. Within all of the constructing institutions, the decision-making institution is of the utmost importance. A mature decision-making system is able to promote efficient and reasonable cooperation among member states, and can also reflect the real degrees of interdependency among members and

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² Michael C. Hudson, *The Middle East Dilemma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.8-25.



integrations within the League. Consequently, institutionalists believe it is the “transforming” and “fulfilling” function of one institution that decide the process and degree of integration. The former function can transform different opinions into consensus, while the latter one enables the integrative organization to fulfill its functions in the cases of forum, independent actors, and agent.³

Regional economic integration organizations after World War II, such as the EU and ASEAN, justify the necessity of these functions of integrative decision-making system. These successful examples also argue that the decision-making system of integrative organization should meet three premier requirements, no matter what other functions it is asked to fulfill. First, such an institution should be able to mediate interests between member states, integrating state or substate level interests into a regional one. Secondly, it should be an efficient organization with every branch under this framework having clear responsibilities. Last but not least, it must have the power of implementation, turning paperwork policies into political achievements.⁴

What role does the decision-making institution of the Arab League play in the integrating process? Does it fulfill these functions? This article answers these questions. The following parts will focus on the essential functions of the decision-making system in the Arab League, using two case studies to analyze the influence of such an institution in the process of Arab integration, and forecasting the integrating trend under the framework of the Arab League.

I. Essential Functions of the Decision-making System in the Arab League

The decision-making systems of international organizations are reflected in the distribution and centralization system of voting rights, which, to be specific, are the responsibilities distributed to the sub-branches of the institution.⁵ In the Arab League, the functional institution consists of the Summit, the Council, the Permanent Committee, the Secretariat, the (non) formally institutionalized special Council of Ministers, and Transitional Arab Parliament. The summit of the Arab League holds one formal meeting annually in March. Informal or special meetings can be arranged between the two formal ones. The summit supplies the leaders of member states with a forum for guideline developments. It also provides the Arab voice on important issues, such as passing an influential resolution of the Council. But the

³ Forum refers to an organization that only acts as a meeting (place) or medium for the open discussion of subjects of public interest and whose decisions have no constraints on any related country; Independent actors refer to an organization that can act freely including making decisions if its own related procedures have been strictly obeyed and whose decisions must be implemented by member countries; Agent refers to an organization that acts only under the authority of its members. Huanrong Xiao, *Regionalism: A Historical Evolution of Theories*(Beijing: Communication University of China Press, 2001), pp.94-95.

⁴ Zhongkui Ye & Xingfang Wang, *The Survey of International Organization*(Beijing: China RenMin University Press, 2001), pp.233-43.

⁵ Jinlong Chang, “The Impact on Sovereignty State from Decision-making Systems of International Organization Innovation,” *Academic Journal of Zhongzhou*, No. 3, 2007.

summit is not involved in the development of specific policies, which is the responsibility of the Council and the Standing Committee. The Council enjoys the decision power at the theoretical level⁶, while the Permanent Committee is in charge of drawing up a wide range of policies. The Joint Defense Council and the Economic and Social Council facilitate the further cooperation in the Arab world in military and economic fields. These sub-institutions share power with the Council by making and carrying out plans in relevant fields. However, the responsibilities of these sub-councils are subordinate and uncertain, enjoying only relative and temporary decision-making power rather than absolute and independent one. The Secretariat is an administrative and mediating institution, dealing with the day-to-day affairs and facilitating their policy implementation. The twelve members of the Council of Ministers hold regular meetings to discuss issues in their respective fields, and submit the final consensus to the Secretariat and the Council.

According to the above elaboration on the institutions of the Arab League, the summit guides the League at the macro level; and the Council and Committee construct specific policy framework; while the Council of Ministers offers advice. When making decisions, the Arab League adopts principles of “unanimity” and “domestic law”, which means that the member states have the final decisions on important issues, rather than the regional cooperative organization. It is the local governments which manipulate the drafting and carrying out of the specific policies in the League. The so-called “final consensus” is no more than the final compromised outcomes among the member states of the League.

The League has never had functional institutions as those of the EU Commission or Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), which assume their essential responsibilities in the form of supranational institutions. Arab regional integrations in the fields of economic, politics, and security require more actual power on the functional institutions of the League. However, the power distribution in the League denies such requirement. One example is that Transitional Arab Parliament has no legislative power. The nineteen functional organizations in the League are subordinate, serving merely as lubricants in communications. The Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) is a pact made by the Arab League to achieve a complete economic bloc that can compete internationally. There should have been a supranational institution to manage this pact, in order to alleviate interferences from member states. The operational committee of Free Trade Area, however, is not equipped with such a power. Though the committee did boost free trade to some degree, it reinforced the importance of negotiations among governments, without facilitating a powerful supranational institution, not to mention the fulfillment of “spillover effect” hoped for by institutionalists.

In a sense, the decision-making process in Arab League is based on the negotiations among its member states. According to the institutionalism theory,

⁶ Istvan Pogany, *The Arab League and Peacekeeping in the Lebanon* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p.8.



the stimulator of such a kind of integrative organization is the common interest of member states. Decision-making institution may transform member states' common interest into common policy, but the acceptance degree is also dependent on how many interests these policies can bring to the country. The homogeneity degree of member states plays the primary role in the whole integration process. The more common interests these members share, the more likely they are to create common requirements, and hence the more likely to change such requirements into homogeneous policies. Discord of interests among the member states seriously hinders the implementation of relevant policies.⁷

The will of member states guide the decision-making process of the League. Whether a policy can be made and carried out is largely dependant on whether there exist common interests among the countries involved. As disagreements among member states keep increasing, it will be more and more difficult to find their common interests. The Arab League should grant more initiative and constructive power to functional institutions to overcome the obstacles generated in the negotiation links among member states.

II. Practical Investigations into Integration of the Decision-making System

The decision-making process in the League lacks efficient regional cooperation, with member states' common interests as the only stimulator of integration. Only when cooperation outperforms unilateral actions would the member states desire to work out a common policy and turn it into concerted action.⁸ Economic and security fields are just such hotbeds where cooperation may bring more benefits than unilateral actions, and the amount of common interests decide the degree of integration. Through analyzing these two fields, the following part will inspect the integration of the Arab League.

A. The economic field

In the economic field, Arab League member states share the most common interests as well as least also sovereign disputes. If common interests stimulate concerted policies, this field should be productive for integrative actions. However, the truth is not that simple. Even in economic fields, member states consider their own country's interests more than those of the other states, which undermines the governmental negotiations. The wide variety of pan-Arab economic plans was not concluded until 1996.⁹ One example of how selfish considerations undermine integration is the compromise of GAFTA. To meet the challenges from the external economic world, the League made a pact to achieve a complete Arab economic bloc.¹⁰

⁷ Xianle Fang, "Intergovernmentalism and European Integration," *Europe*, No.1, 2002.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lian Wang, "The Creation and Development of Greater Arab Free Trade Area," *Zhujiang Economy*, No. 9, 2004.

¹⁰ Baizhi Liao, "Information of Greater Arab Free Trade Area," *International Information Journal*, No. 5, 2005.

The idea of such coordination was proposed by Egypt and passed in the 1996 summit, and was finally adopted in 1997, with 17 Arab League members signing the pact. Each of the member states, however, wanted to maximize their respective interests in this economic cooperation, disagreed on many aspects, such as the objective (tariff union or free trade zone), the growth pattern, tax breaks, and the responsibilities and obligations of member states.¹¹ The final compromise, *The Agreement of Arab Free Trade Area*, prescribed member states' reciprocal obligations to decrease tax and eliminate non-tariff barriers, in order to boost the regional free trade. But each of the member states can work out their own executive programs and timetables. The 22 member states have different levels of economic development as well as various economic structures. Because the dependency among member states is weak and the regional coordinative organization is not powerful enough to guide the integrative progress, the member states naturally adopt the most beneficial policies to protect their own interests. Consequently, the operation of this free trade area is actually interdependent on the specific policies in each member states. Externally, the League may become an integral economic body to confront the outside challenges, but internally, local governments still have the decisions on autonomous economic policies.

B. The security field

For the League member states, it is their mutual requirement to create a peaceful and stable regional environment. To achieve such a goal, two things should be done. Firstly, the regional conflicts should be overcome, including intra-Arab ones and disputes between Arab states and other countries in this region. Secondly, a new outside security safeguard framework should be constructed in which other dominant countries can participate but not interfere in the League's security affairs.

The League has made some achievements in the security field. On one hand, the League has served as a platform for the member states to promote mutual understanding, resolve conflicts, negotiate policies, and enhance further cooperation. Contrarily, it supplies a forum to multilateral powers to negotiate security-relevant issues, including League member states, such as non-Arab countries in the Middle East, North America, Russia, the European Union, and China. In this forum, member states collectively negotiate with the third party. By involving all the Arab countries in this region into an organization, the League successfully constructs an intra-Arab negotiation framework, hence avoiding many escalations from disputes to conflicts. By supplying an international forum, the League enables its member states to step onto the Middle East stage collectively. Though this forum has not empowered the Arab League as the representative of its member states, it still enables the League to negotiate with other powers, to construct the Middle East security framework as an independent actor. In this

¹¹ A Research Report from The Economic and Commercial Counsellor's Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Lebanon, "Greater Arab Free Trade Area and Sino-Arab Trade". See <http://lb.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/ztdy/200504/20050400074664.html> (2005-04-20).



framework, it is possible for the Arab League to upgrade itself from a forum organizer to a real representative of this regional organization.

According to the above analysis, the Arab integration degree differs between the economic and security fields. In the former field, the Arab League has tried out its role as a representative, by promoting the Free Trade Area and negotiating with other countries and organizations. After the Free Trade Area has developed, member states are likely to submit some power to the League, and let it represent individual countries to take charge of administration and negotiation. During this course, the Arab League is likely to change into an autonomous actor. Comparatively, the League is more a forum than a representative in the security field, while member states are still the actual actors. The institutional structure is a main factor for the different roles of the League in economic and security fields. Whether the institution framework can develop under the outside pressures may decide whether it can upgrade to the group representative or the role of an independent actor.

III. Comparative Study on Decision-making Systems of the Arab League and EU

The European Union differs from the Arab League in many aspects, among which the differences in its decision-making institution are most obvious. On the integrating road of the EU, two decision-making systems exist, inter-governmental ones such as European Summit and Council of Ministers, and supranational institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the European Court. The European integration has been developing under the interaction of the European Community and intergovernmental institutions. These decision-making institutions have a clear division of responsibilities, and maintain a good balance in drawing up and carrying out of policies. The European Commission is the executive branch of the European Union. The body is responsible for proposing legislation, implementing decisions, upholding the Union's treaties and the general day-to-day running of the Union. The Council of Ministers makes decisions on the proposals put forth by the Commission. The European Parliament is also involved in decision making in some fields, and it together with the Council forms the highest legislative body within the Union. The Council is composed of 27 national ministers, and because the voting is more and more based on the "absolute majority" principle, the efficiency of decision-making procedure has been improved. In its intergovernmental mechanisms, the Council of Ministers can make suggestions to European Summit, and can make its own decisions in some fields. The European Summit (also referred to as the European Council) has no formal executive or legislative powers. It is an institution that deals with major issues and any decisions made are "a major impetus in defining the general political guidelines of the European Union." Consequently, decision-making institutions of European Union consist of drafting and implementation of policies in intergovernmental and supranational mechanisms at

the European level, as well as negotiations and cooperation among governments under the European level.¹²

Because of the coexistence of the decision-making institutions at two levels, European integration has never been short of intrinsic impetus. The European Commission and Council of Ministers compete with each other to play a more active role in decision-making procedures. The European Commission is a primary institution for proposing legislation and implementing decisions. Based on its strong relationship with a wide variety of interests groups and think tanks and the profound knowledge in relevant fields, the European Commission makes suggestions as well as rules, and further the integration in legislation. In such a decision-making institution, relevant departments endeavor to meet multilateral requirements on a wide range of issues, from negotiation among governments to proposing and implementing supranational policies from domestic and foreign guidelines to specific legislative files. Under such a framework, even if member states cannot reach a consensus on some important issues, integration in other fields will not be impeded. However, this institution can still not fully meet the new challenges and resolve the conflicts between domestic development and international collaboration. The spillover effect is not beneficial enough to resolve the conflicts in the process of further integration and EU enlargement. The compromise resulted from bargains among governments cannot fulfill the requirements of better integration, so it forms some impediments to decision-making efficiency. Without powerful external impetus and common internal requirements, the integration process in the EU also meets with difficulties in some fields, especially in those that call for the transmission of autonomy. Compared with the EU, the Arab League has relatively sound but non-supranational institutions. The League adopts a free-trade-area policy in the economic field. Under this policy, only a meditative institution is required, and no sovereign rights are called to be submitted. With a loose instead of a formal and supranational authority, the Arab League emphasizes on the absolute equality of member states' sovereignty and maintains the principles of unanimity and mutual noninterference in domestic affairs. Just as an Egyptian scholar put it, "unlike European Union, the Arab League never plans to build up a supranational institution which collects some sovereign rights from its member states. The Arab League has no supranational institutions like European Commission or European Council to propose legislation and implement decisions."¹³

IV. Conclusion

Among all the other variables which affect the Arab integration process, this article focuses on the decision-making institution in the Arab League. When the

¹² Hua Li, "An Analysis of EU's Governing Structure," *International Studies*, No. 2, 2005.

¹³ Yifei Feng, "Arab League: Far From A Concerted Voice," *News China*, Vol.175, April 12, 2004, pp.44-45.



League was first founded, it adopted an intergovernmental negotiating framework to make decisions. Though the integrating focus has shifted onto economic development, such a decision-making institution has not changed much. The maintenance of such an institution proves that the Arab integration has just begun its progress to “joint decision-making and sharing of resources”, and the intimate interdependency among its member states is still distant. On their integrating road, League member states wish to maximize their benefits and minimize the losses, especially the loss in sovereignty. With a limited strategic prospect, Arab integration has not developed deeply enough into the sovereign problems, and the deficiency of this institutional framework has emerged in the League’s economic and security fields. National governments choose intergovernmental mechanisms to reserve their sovereignty in their integrating process, with the mutual interests as the impetus to integration. However, such a “mutual interests” consideration involves a dilemma: on one hand, as member states expect further cooperation to increase the benefits; but on the other hand, the League did not adjust the decision-making institution to meet new challenges. On this background, the possibility of consensus from “unanimity principle” diminishes, and even the drafting and implementing of policies become more difficult. Experiences from the EU teach that institutional reform is necessarily full of twists and turns. More intimate interdependency and more intensive pressure may lead to new mutual interests and even final reform. To maximize the mutual economic interests, a supranational institution is needed, to propose legislations, guarantee implementations, and regulate actions of member states.

After the Iraq War, Arab countries endeavored to accelerate the integration process. In March 2004, the Arab League decided to reform its institutional framework. In January 2005, GAFTA came into existence. In March of 2006, Arab integration became a top item on the agenda of the Arab summit. In November 2007, the Council of Arab Economic Unity decided to enhance the integration process. But the first economic Summit in January 2009 did not witness the expected breakthrough.¹⁴ Judging from the series of efforts, it seems that the Arab League has been pursuing a balance between integration and sovereign reserves, rather than a substantial reform. Such a pursuit, however, is bound to contradict developmental needs and integrative theories. As a concrete realization of regionalism, the integration process must be at the expense of part of sovereignty. The Arab League lacks an efficient decision-making institution and supranational policy-implementing mechanism. Its domestic and foreign policies are dependant on the specific conditions in member states. Consequently, to build up an institutional framework as stable and efficient as that of EU, to boost the integration process and play a more active role on the international stage, the Arab League has a long way to go.

¹⁴ “Kuwait Summit Serious Step towards Establishing Arab Economic Bloc, ” [http://www.bilaterals.org/article.php?id_article=14213&lang=fr\(2009-01-18\)](http://www.bilaterals.org/article.php?id_article=14213&lang=fr(2009-01-18)).