Throughout the year 2004, the Arab League invited its members to submit proposals for reforming and developing the whole Arab regional system. As a result, a group of countries submitted many drafts and ideas which triggered an extensive debate in the conferences of the Arab foreign ministers and the Arab Summit that was held in Tunis on 22nd to 23rd May 2004. The Tunis Summit issued some documents which included the pledges of the Arab leaders to carry out comprehensive reform in the Arab League and to continue the domestic modernization of their countries. However, there was no finite schedule for implementing these reforms, which is itself a major weak point.

After the American occupation of Iraq, the Arab League faced many major challenges, while most Arab countries felt that their sovereignty and very existence was seriously at stake. Upon the request of the Arab League, seven Arab countries, including Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Qatar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, submitted some proposals and drafts. It was the first time that the Arab system had had such an amount of drafts and ideas of reform, which reflected the unprecedented enthusiasm.

Despite the differing proposals, there were some common points. The most important are: 1) the joint Arab market is the suitable gateway to Arab integration, 2) the need of implementing some domestic economic reforms in the Arab countries and giving a bigger role to the private sector, 3) the importance of strengthening the partnerships with the other international blocs, 4) the sustaining development of the Arab countries, 5) the necessity of supporting civil societies in the Arab states, and 6) the importance of modifying the voting system of the Arab League and changing the rule of unanimity to a majority one.

The 120th session of the Arab League

Under that environment, the Arab League held its 120th session in July, at Arab foreign minister level, in its headquarters in Cairo. Twenty-one Arab foreign ministers participated in that conference including Hoshiar Al-Zibari, the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs while Libya boycotted the conference. Before the conference, there was an extensive debate about allowing Iraq to participate while it is under the American occupation. The debate also touched on respecting the first article of the Arab League charter, which restricts membership to the Arab League to sovereign independent states only.

Despite the importance of that debate from both political and legal angles, the Arab foreign ministers agreed to prioritize the interests of the Iraqi people and to allow the participation of the Iraqi Governing Council in the activities of the Arab League. This decision was made on a temporary basis until the finalization of the Iraqi constitution and the holding of an election for an internationally recognized Iraqi sovereign government. In fact, this decision reflected that the Arab countries welcomed and accepted the Governing Council as a step towards electing a legitimate Iraqi government. Egypt played a major role in passing the above mentioned decision. It agreed with some other Arab countries to consider the stance of the United Nations regarding the Governing Council as a reference for the Arab stance.

The Tunisian President, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, unilaterally decided to postpone the Summit without giving any specific reason.
The Tunisia Declaration, which outlined in his report the nine proposals submitted by the Arab countries to reform and develop the Arab League:

- establishing an Arab consultation council or Arab parliament;
- establishing an Arab court of justice;
- establishing a council or a forum for issues of regional security;
- maintaining a plan for cementing an integrated Arab economy;
- establishing an Arab bank for investment and development run along free economy lines;
- enhancing the social and economic council and to allow Arab civil society organizations to play a role within the framework of the joint Arab activities;
- reviewing the voting process used by the Arab League;
- checking a new mechanism for guaranteeing the implementation of Arab League decisions;
- studying a proposal to form a forum for Arab intellectuals and scholars to discuss the problems of the Arab world.

The Arab Summit issued a number of documents:

1. The Tunisia Declaration, which included the insistence of the Arab leaders for “peace as a strategic choice” to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict; the commitment of the Arab community to support Iraqi territorial integrity and to respect its independence; achieving integration among Arab countries; the commitment of the Arab countries to contribute to the international efforts against and to combat all forms of terrorism and to differentiate between legitimate resistance and terrorism; calling for the holding of an international conference, under the auspices of the United Nations, in order to establish an international code of ethics for the fight against terrorism, while working to tackle the causes at the root of this phenomenon; supporting the United Nations to play a central and active role in Iraq; urging the international community to protect the Palestinians from Israeli aggression.

2. Statement of Modernization in the Arab world. It reaffirmed the intentions of the Arab leaders to continue the process of modernization in political, economic, social and educational fields; to strengthen the principles of democracy and consultation; to enlarge participation in political and public life; to widen women’s participation and empowerment; to set a comprehensive Arab strategy for economic and social development; to cooperate with the international community on the basis of joint interests; to foster regional and international stability and peace; to increase the efforts to achieve a fair and comprehensive settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

3. Statement of Pledge, Concordance and Solidarity among Arab leaders. They reaffirmed their compliance with the comprehensive Arab peace initiative declared in Beirut in 2002, by continuing the efforts to reform the Arab League, by supporting consultation and coordination among Arab countries in the fields of security, defence and foreign affairs, and by completing the Arab free trade zone.

Despite the importance of those documents, there are still some defects:

- Regarding the peace process, the Summit only called on the international community to exert more pressure on Israel to resolve the siege on the Palestinians. The Summit delegated the Arab foreign ministers to handle the international mobilization without specifying what authority they had.
- Regarding the process of reform in Arab countries, the documents just clarified the intentions of the Arab leaders to go on with reform efforts in their respective countries, without naming any specific missions to be started immediately.
- The summit dealt in an obscure and traditional way with the international forces, especially those which support the Arab cause and share with the Arab world the challenges such as terrorism, confronting the idea of the clash of civilizations and coping with the side-effects of globalization.
- The summit limited itself to just supporting the proposal of the Brazilian President to hold a summit between the Arab and Latin American countries for the sake of developing joint relations. At the same time, the summit did not mention any other international organizations which have strong
relations with the Arab world, such as
the African Union and the Islamic
Conference Organization.
• The documents of the Summit limit-
ed themselves to just mentioning the
idea of supporting the Mediterranean
Partnership but did not offer any
detailed perspective about. The Sum-
mit also did not mention anything about
how to strengthen relations with the
European Union.

Among discussions and ideas introduced
at the Tunisia Summit, three trends relat-
ing to the reform of the Arab League start-
ed to crystallize. The first trend believes
that it is better for things to stay as they
are. The second is a moderate position
which believes in both gradual and par-
tial reform but without any strict plan or
specific timetable. The third trend calls
for overall structural reform as soon as
possible. Such trends are interacting with
each other through political channels and
the mass media, but they are still unable
to reach a joint Arab position on the reform
of the Arab League.