

# The Arab League and the Challenge of Self-Reform

## **Hassan Abou Taleb**

Assistant Director

Editor-in-Chief of “The Arab Strategic Report”

Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo

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 inte-

gration, 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.

Some other issues were discussed in the conference, including the development of a peaceful settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict on both the Palestinian and Syrian tracks, the requests placed by both Turkey and Eritrea to be accepted as passive members in the meetings of the League and the Brazilian request to hold an Arab – Latin summit with the Latin American leaders. Finally, the Arab ministers reviewed the Sino-Arab relations, the Arab-African relations and the Mediterranean partnership.

## **Tunisia Summit, May 2004**

The Tunisia Summit was supposed to be held on 21st March 2004. It was preceded by a conference held by the Arab foreign ministers where they agreed upon some documents to be finalized by the Arab leaders in Tunisia. A special declaration about the reform of the Arab League and another declaration about the internal reform processes were among the most important of those documents. After the arrival of Arab foreign ministers in Tunisia on the night before the opening session of the Summit, the Tunisian President, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, unilaterally decided to postpone the Summit without giving any specific rea-

sons. The decision was a big shock for the Arab foreign ministers and the Arab public opinion which was looking for the Summit to issue serious and clear decisions about the comprehensive Arab reform.

There were many interpretations for the sudden and unusual Tunisian stance. Tunisia said that it was a sovereign decision. Although the other Arab countries rejected this argument, saying that, traditionally the Arab summits are based on the concordance of the Arab leaders and on the protocol adopted two years earlier. This protocol clearly states that the summits have to be held annually in March and hosted successively by Arab countries in alphabetical order.

The unofficial interpretations combined two points. The first was the apology submitted by a large number of Arab leaders for not attending, which put the Tunisian President in an embarrassing situation and he consequently unilaterally postponed the Summit. The second was the dispute among the Arab foreign ministers when they were trying to finalize the Summit statement regarding Arab reform. Many Arab foreign ministers disagreed with a paragraph persistently proposed by the Tunisian delegation. It included an Arab pledge to comply with the ambiguous so-called universal ethics. It could be said that the three reasons collectively contributed to the decision which was taken without consulting other Arab leaders according to the well established tradition.

Under the shock created by the sudden Tunisian decision, Egypt proposed to hold the Arab summit in the Cairo premises of the Arab League as soon as possible. Such a decision gave a magnificent momentum to the Arab countries which thought that it was important to hold the Summit on its pre-set schedule without delay. Arab public opinion was also asking to preserve the Arab League and reform its functions without delay.

After elaborate consultations held by Amr Moussa, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, with a number of Arab leaders, it was decided to hold the Arab summit in Tunisia on 22nd to 23rd May 2004.

The Arab Summit was actually held on this new modified schedule. Amr Moussa 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 limited themselves to just mentioning the idea of supporting the Mediterranean Partnership but did not offer any detailed perspective about. The Summit 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 relating to the reform of the Arab League started 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 partial 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.