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## Issue Brief

# 28<sup>th</sup> Arab Summit: Beyond the Veneer of Optimism

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**"We will now make all efforts to translate them (recommendations) into reality<sup>1</sup>." This was stated by King Abdullah of Jordan in his closing remarks at the 28th Arab Summit on March 29, 2017.**



The summit was an opportunity to showcase a united front for a region marred in conflict. With all the internal violence in the Arab world, the presence of sixteen Arab leaders at the summit - the rest of the member states were represented by high-ranking officials - was ranked by many as a success. Special Representative for the Russian President and Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov was also in attendance<sup>2</sup> as was the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini<sup>3</sup>. The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, and Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy for Syria were also present.

The Arab League (official name "League of Arab States") is a regional body of Arab states. The League's main purposes are the establishment of closer relations among its members, the promotion of cooperation among them, the protection of their sovereignty, and the execution of a joint mutual way forward for the affairs and interests of the Arab countries. The Arab League has twenty-two full members namely: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. It also has four observer states: Eritrea, Brazil, Venezuela and India.

The 2017 Summit was held on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea with King Abdullah leading after receiving the rotating presidency from Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. The meeting set the stage for the visits by three Arab leaders to Washington in April; Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's White House visit on April 3, Jordan's King Abdullah's visit on April 5, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' visit - the dates of which are yet to be announced.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/arab-summit-concludes-message-peace%E2%80%99-call-solidarity>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2598314&language=en>

<sup>3</sup> [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/23717/speech-high-representative-vice-president-federica-mogherini-opening-session-28th-summit\\_fr](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/23717/speech-high-representative-vice-president-federica-mogherini-opening-session-28th-summit_fr)

At the end of the Summit, the Arab League issued the Amman Declaration. The statement was read by the Secretary-General of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit and emphasized that peace should remain an integral focus as envisioned in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative<sup>4</sup>.

Highest on the League's agenda was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as repeated attempts to revive what can be labelled as fragments of the peace process have failed and the difficult situation on the ground has become even more complicated to resolve. In his remarks, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas highlighted the need to increase joint efforts regarding the Middle East peace process. He called for restoring momentum to the Palestinian cause, which he described as "the core conflict in the region."<sup>5</sup>

Amongst other statements, the declaration stated that Israel's settlements were illegitimate, and urged the enforcement of last year's UN Security Council Resolution 2334. The declaration also called for the release of all prisoners, as well as outlining the needful and stating that the refugee issue needs to be resolved urgently, in line with the relevant international resolutions. In addition to the Palestinian question, the agenda for the summit vowed to address the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, as well as Libya and Iraq<sup>6</sup>.

With respect to Syria, Arab leaders agreed on the need to reach a political solution to end the conflict and protect the unity and territorial rectitude of the country. The proclamation also urged Turkey to withdraw its forces from Iraqi territories, observing that their presence constitutes a violation of Iraq's sovereignty and a threat to pan-Arab security. Simultaneously, the statement highlighted Iraq's efforts in uprooting terrorism and praised its work in driving out the Islamic State from its territory. Terrorism was pointed out as a common threat to the Arab nation, separate from any religion, and requiring an all-encompassing counter policy. The declaration also condemned any interference in the Arab states' internal affairs.

It was also decided to assign a ministerial committee to work out apparatuses to help countries hosting refugees. The declaration also voiced the leaders' support to Yemen's legitimate government, welcoming the establishment of an Arab-European summit for cooperation<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=1609883>

<sup>5</sup> <http://ww2.un.org.jo/?folio=7POYGN0G2>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.arabsummit2017.jo/en/content/arab-league>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

For his part, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres highlighted the plight of refugees and lamented on the fact that developed countries have closed their borders to the region's oppressed. Guterres also stated that the two-state solution was the only solution to the Palestinian issue, and said that "there is no plan B."<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging the "deep sense of anguish of the Palestinian people"<sup>9</sup>, the UN chief emphasized that "Palestinians and Israelis do not need conflict management; they need conflict resolution."<sup>10</sup>

Among other things, Guterres also prompted Arab leaders to shape "a new Arab world"<sup>11</sup>, based on interaction, coactions and dialogue, to address and resolve collective challenges. "Divisions in the Arab world have opened the door to foreign intervention and manipulation, breeding instability, sectarian strife and terrorism<sup>12</sup>," he stated.

Despite the lack of vigour at the summit, there were some interesting shifts in the regional structures. For example, Saudi Arabia's King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud's one-on-one meeting with Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sissi that broke the ice between them. Another important meeting was a three-way gathering of host Jordanian King Abdullah with al-Sissi and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas - a united Arab position will be essential in dealing with the current ambiguous thinking process of the new White House administration.

However, beyond the veneer of optimistic language, the Summit essentially concluded with a vague joint statement but nothing concrete that would showcase determination to move forward. It cannot be denied that over the years, Arab summits have developed a familiar routine, dominated by divisions and empty gestures. The Arab people have long lost confidence in their leaders. The crises in the Arab world have turned into international conflicts, and the Arab League is incapable of making any decisions. It is clear that there can be no solutions sidestepping the international actors involved in the region.

However, it must be recognized that the annual Arab summit has become a platform for leaders to show their people that they are still loyal to Arab causes, although it has done little to convince the world of Arab unity on any one issue - Arab leaders have been unable to stop the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-guterres-idUSKBN15U1RF>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2017-03-29/secretary-generals-address-summit-league-arab-states-prepared>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.pressreader.com/saudi-arabia/arab-news/20170330/281603830304923>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/highlight/2017-03-29.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

and Yemen. So far, Palestine seems to be the only boulevard for which all members are willing to provide lip service. Current UN efforts in Astana and Geneva do provide a glimmer of hope. The international community particularly the Arab people have to wait another year to see if these “statements” will indeed be translated into actions before the 29<sup>th</sup> Summit which is to take place in Saudi Arabia in 2018.