

# THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES AND THE INTERNATIONAL PROJECTION OF AN ARAB COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

## A LIGA ÁRABE DE ESTADOS E A PROJEÇÃO INTERNACIONAL DE UMA IDENTIDADE COLETIVA ÁRABE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role the League of Arab States (LAS) plays in the international projection of an Arab collective identity. The main issues addressed are the Arab boycott against Israel, the bilateral agreements between the Arab League and other states, and the relations established between the LAS and other regional blocs.

### KEY-WORDS

League of Arab States; Collective Identity; Inter-Regionalism.

### RESUMO

Este trabalho examina o papel que a Liga dos Estados Árabes (LAS) desempenha na projeção internacional de uma identidade coletiva árabe. As principais questões abordadas são o boicote árabe contra Israel, os acordos bilaterais entre a Liga Árabe e outros Estados e as relações estabelecidas entre essa organização árabe e outros blocos regionais.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Liga Árabe de Estados; Identidade Coletiva; Inter-Regionalismo.

### Introduction

Michael Foucault describes identity as “a complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis” (in Faubion; Rabinow 1994, 386). Notwithstanding Foucault’s insights, a quick internet search using the words “Arab League” in different languages reveals that, from the main headlines of The New York Times, The Guardian, The Economist, Le Figaro, Le

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Monde Diplomatique, Folha de S. Paulo, Al-Hayat and Al-Jazeera, the League of Arab States is throughout the world known as the representative body of the twenty-two self-proclaimed Arab states. The LAS, in this sense, even if unable to master the (impossible) power of synthesis implied by the adjective “Arab” that purportedly defines the organization’s persona, has certainly managed to project an international identity.

This same quick search also reveals that the adjectives most commonly associated with the LAS are “inefficient”, “paralyzed”, and “weak”. However, it is a common saying in English that *any publicity is good publicity*, and as hard as some scholars, the media, Middle Eastern experts, and politicians dismiss the Arab organization as “a group that has had nothing but six decades of failure” (as the recently suspended from the LAS Syrian President Bashar al-Assad described it) the Arab League has managed to project itself as the international representative of the Arab states and has acted as a unified group in several international forums, summits and conferences.

In this paper, the role the League of Arab States (LAS) plays in the international projection of an Arab collective identity is examined. It will focus on the coordination of Arab states’ efforts to play a more active international role through the auspices of the League of Arab States and its General Secretariat. The main issues here addressed are the Arab boycott against Israel, the bilateral agreements between the Arab League and other states, and the relations established between the LAS and other regional blocs.

### **The LAS and the Arab boycott against Israel**

Perhaps the most widely known example of Arab collective action coordinated by the LAS is the organization and maintenance of the Arab boycott of Israel. Although some authors claim that economic boycotts had been used by Arabs against the Jewish community in Palestine since the end of the 19th century, in fact the Arab boycott against Israel, as it is known today, was brought about by a formal decision of the LAS in 1945 which eventually became “the most institutionalized and comprehensive system of economic sanctions ever imposed against a people and a state” (Feiler 1998, 2).

Weiss (2006, 2) explains that the LAS does not impose the boycott on its member states, notwithstanding that “the regulations have been the model for various laws implemented by member countries. Under the League’s recommendations, member countries should demand certificates of origin on all goods acquired from suppliers to ensure that such goods meet all aspects of the boycott”. Even if the “enforcement of the boycott by member countries is sporadic” (Weiss 2006, 2) with several “cracks in the system” (Feiler 1998, 3),

such as the existing evidence that “some member countries publicly support the boycott while continuing to quietly trade with Israel” (Weiss 2006, 2), there is no doubt that “the boycott has [had] a major effect on the Israeli economy over the years” (Feiler 1998, 5). The most staunch opposition to the Arab boycott comes from the United States (after Israel, naturally). Since the 1970s the United States has had an anti-boycott legislation and the country makes use of its economic power to force Arab countries to break the boycott. As Weiss (2006, 4) explains, “in 2005 and 2006, respectively, Bahrain and Oman agreed to drop the boycott as a provision of their free trade agreements (FTA) with the United States”. In spite of the cracks in the system, the Israeli disdain of the consequences of the boycott, and the constant American pressure for the Arab states to bring it to an end, the Arab collective action to impose sanctions against Israel is maintained. As the table below demonstrates, in one year only more than 1.000 requests were made to US companies demanding their compliance with the rules of the boycott.

<b>Boycott requests received by US companies</b>	
<i>October 2004–September 2005</i>	
<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of requests to comply with secondary and tertiary boycotts</i>
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	<b>408</b>
Other (Algeria, India, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Yemen)	<b>251</b>
Lebanon	<b>84</b>
Qatar	<b>65</b>
Saudi Arabia	<b>62</b>
Kuwait	<b>55</b>
Syria	<b>51</b>
Bahrain	<b>22</b>
Libya	<b>22</b>
Iraq	<b>8</b>
Egypt	<b>5</b>
Jordan	<b>4</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1037</b>

Source: Department of Commerce (Weiss 2006, 5-6).

Although the Arab boycott of Israel is the most publicized one, it is not the most relevant example of the LAS' capacity to coordinate its activities and to be recognized by the members of the international community as the representative body of the Arab states. The LAS "in spite of all the upheavals that have shaken the Arab regional order [...] has continued to develop and expand its activities" (Said 2010, 13). This assertion is corroborated by the many situations when the LAS interacts as a regional bloc with other parties.

### **The LAS and bilateralism**

In 2004, during the visit of the President of China to the headquarters of the LAS in Cairo, the Arab organization and China formally launched the China-Arab Cooperation Forum. According to information gathered from the English edition of the People Daily of May 13, 2010, a fourth Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab Cooperation Forum took place in the city of Tianjin, in the north of China. The Federation of Arab News Agencies also reported on May 22, 2011, the holding of the eighth China-Arab Cooperation Forum, which took place in Doha. The periodicity of the meetings reveals an annual event at the business-community level and a bi-annual event at the Ministerial level. It is important to note that the then Chinese President Hu Jintao and the then General Secretary of LAS, Amr Moussa, signed the declaration and the action plan for the forum, with Moussa's signature representing those of the twenty two heads of state members of the LAS. The Sino-Arab trade volume is reported to have increased from US\$36.4 billion in 2004 to US\$107.4 in 2009<sup>2</sup> (Said 2010, 13).

Similarly, in 2008, a joint effort between the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the LAS led to the Arab-India Cooperation Forum, with the aim of boosting political and economic relations and increasing the bilateral trade to half billion dollars in a ten-year period. The memorandum of bilateral cooperation was signed by the then India External Affairs Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, and the then General Secretary of the LAS, Amr Moussa. The Arab-India Cooperation Forum covers areas ranging from trade and investment, energy, human resources development, cultural exchanges, information communication and technology. According to data presented by Said (2010, 13) the Arab-India Cooperation Forum almost tripled the volume of trade between the Arab world and India, which reached US\$110 billion in 2009.

One of the most important Arab bilateral forums launched during the last decade was the Arab-Turkey Cooperation Forum, inaugurated in 2008 in

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<sup>2</sup> No disaggregated numbers were found, though, which means that the impact of the reported increase in trade volume on the general product basket and on individual Arab states cannot be measured. All numbers presented in this section should be read with this cautious note in mind.

Istanbul and held annually since then. Initially focusing exclusively on the promotion of trade and cooperation in the field of higher education, as soon as its second meeting was held in Damascus, the Arab-Turkey Cooperation Forum provided “an institutional framework to promote cooperation and comprehensive consultations in all fields of mutual interest”. During the 2010 Arab-Turkey Cooperation Forum, the Turkish Minister of Finance announced that “as a result of the free trade agreements between Ankara and Arab countries the volume of trade between Turkey and the Arab world in 2009 was five times greater than in 2002” (Said 2010, 13).

In 2009, the Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Minister of Foreign Affairs representing Japan together with the General Secretary of the Arab League representing the twenty two Arab states signed an agreement establishing the Arab-Japanese Economic Forum. This forum has the declared aim of strengthening the Japanese-Arab bilateral cooperation in the fields of energy and environment, human resources development, education, science and technology as well as investment, tourism, finance, and trade. According to data presented by the Embassy of Japan in Egypt, the second meeting of the Arab-Japanese Economic Forum took place in Tunis, on December 11-12, 2010. From the Japanese side, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry attended the meeting. From the Arab side, the then Tunisian Prime Minister also attended the event, together with more than one thousand people from Japan and the Arab countries, including at least thirty minister-level officials from both sides. During this second meeting, which followed the first one held in Tokyo in December 2009, it was announced agreement on almost forty cooperation projects in the fields mentioned above.

Also in 2009, during a visit of the then Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, to the LAS' headquarters in Cairo, a memorandum establishing the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum was signed between him and Amr Moussa. The first Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum was held in the Russian capital in December 2010 and, according to the head of the department for the Middle East and North Africa of Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the aim of the forum is to promote “better political coordination between us [Russia and the Arab world] and to strengthen our relations in the economic, financial, investment spheres, culture, sports as well as in other sectors” (RIA Novosti 8 April 2010).

If the above described “bilateralism” between the LAS and other states are testimony that the LAS is recognized as a unified actor by the above mentioned countries, it is in its cooperation with other regional organizations in the Third World that the LAS shows how much its existence “matters” in world politics. Indeed, Acharya (2007, 651) has made a call to students of regions to “pay more

attention to interregional (region-to-region, as opposed to just global-to-regional) dynamics” because inter-regionalisms, according to him, “play an important role in determining whether regions truly matter in world politics”.

The European Union, for instance, never invited the Arab states’ representative organization to engage in the construction of the Euro-Med Partnership. It preferred instead to deal on a bilateral basis with “selected” Arab states, an approach that was not sought by the European Union when dealing with Mercosur (vide the 1995 Interregional Framework Cooperation Agreement between the European Community and Mercosur). The European Union is not interested in developing with the Arab world what Acharya (2007, 637) describes as a “horizontal relationship between regions”. This type of relationship is however, exactly the kind of relationship the LAS is seeking to forge with South America, through the Summit of South American-Arab Countries, the ASPA Summit.

### **The LAS and inter-regionalism**

The ASPA Summit is a mechanism for inter-regional cooperation and a forum for policy coordination, which aims to bring together the leaders of South America and the Arab world. The ASPA Summit was proposed by the then Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, during his visit to several Arab capitals in 2003. The ASPA Summit was formally established during the First Summit of Heads of State and Government held in Brasilia on 10-11 May, 2005. The second ASPA Summit was held in Doha, Qatar, on March 31, 2009. The third ASPA summit, which was scheduled to be held in February 2011 in Lima, Peru, was however postponed to September 2012, due to the Arab uprisings. The Peruvian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rafael Roncagliolo, along with the then General Secretary of the LAS, Nabil El-Arabi, chaired the third meeting of the ASPA Council of Foreign Ministers held in September 2011 in New York when the new agenda for the third Summit was presented.

Two regional groupings are represented in the ASPA – the members of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Arab League’s members. On the South American side the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations is the regional coordinator, whilst on the Arab side the coordination is carried out by the General Secretariat of the LAS. The follow-up actions of the ASPA Summits are conducted through an schedule of meetings of ministers, senior officials and experts as well as through five Sectorial Committees that conduct cooperative actions in the economic, cultural, scientific, technological, environmental and social fields (Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations, 2011).

According to a declaration made by Jose Antonio Garcia Belaunde, the then Peruvian Minister of Foreign Affairs, to the weekly Al-Ahram during his

visit to Egypt in November 2010 “since the first summit in Brazil [2005], South American countries and Arab countries have been successful in following up on the recommendations to pursue closer cooperation. And we have already more investment and more trade being exchanged” (Ezzat 2010b, 6). For the head of Brazilian Foreign Ministry’s Inter-regional Mechanisms, Gilberto Moura (as in 2011), the duplication of bilateral trade between the two regions in a period of five years (from US\$ 10.5 billion in 2005, the year of the first ASPA Summit to US\$ 19.54 billion in 2010) is a clear indication that the efforts to approximate South America and the Arab world are paying off (Brazil-Arab News Agency, 2011).

Although the ASPA Summit focus is clearly on inter-regional cooperation in the commercial field (there is even the objective of constituting a South American Federation of Arab Chambers of Commerce to further stimulate interregional exchange) this is not the only focus. There has been technical cooperation in reducing the impact of desertification and land degradation, as well as there have been intense cultural exchanges between the two regions. The constitution of BibliASPA (Library of South America – Arab countries) is considered a great ASPA Summit achievement. BibliASPA is creating libraries in South America with physical and virtual collections specializing in Arab cultural production which includes literature, cinema, music, dance and poetry. In addition it is translating books, organizing lectures, film showings and expositions on Arab-related themes as well as publishing books on issues of cultural relevance for South America and the Arab world (BibliASPA 2011 *online*).

Finally, the ASPA Summit must also be seen as a form of inter-regionalism that seeks to forge international policy coordination between South America and the Arab world on issues that are of common interest for both regions. Such issues include the reform of international organizations, the strengthening of international law and multilateralism, support for the peaceful settlement of disputes in the Middle East and South America as well as the promotion of economic development and dialogue of civilizations (Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Relations, 2011).

As far as the international policy coordination is concerned, the LAS is also engaged in developing relations with African neighbours, as can be attested by the second Arab-African summit convened in Sirte in November 2010. Although “no detailed plan was offered to promote Arab-African relations” an “act of engagement” was assumed in the adoption of “a document on strategic partnership and a plan for action to promote food and energy security, expand trade exchange and pursue political consultations [between] the Arab League and the Africa Union” (Ezzat 2010b, 6).

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper put forward the argument that the League of Arab States (LAS) has managed to project itself as the international representative of the twenty-two (self-declared) Arab states and has succeeded in acting as a unified group in several international forums, summits and conferences. The fact that the General Secretary of the LAS is allowed to sign agreements with chiefs of state all over the world in the name of twenty two states is a concrete evidence that the LAS is capable of making a bridge between its member states and the rest of the world. This adds a pragmatic element to the belonging to a regional institution thus reinforcing the perception of its member states that being part of that group, identified as Arab, is worth it.

It is difficult to make an analogy with Risse's words (2004, 255), according to which "the EU has achieved identity hegemony in the sense that 'Europe' increasingly denotes the political and social space occupied by the EU", and claim that the LAS has also achieved identity hegemony, in the sense that "the Arab world" and the "Arab region" also denotes the political and social space occupied by the member states of the LAS. However, it is certainly even more difficult to deny the LAS' power to project internationally a purportedly collective Arab identity.



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