

*Position Paper*

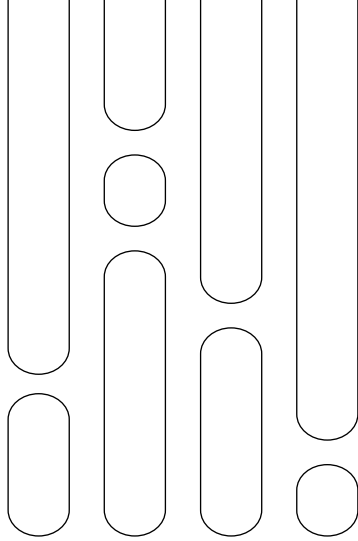
# CONSEQUENCES AND SIGNIFICATIONS OF HOLDING THE ARAB LEAGUE SUMMIT IN LIGHT OF REGIONAL AND GLOBAL SHIFTS

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Saudi Arabia's city of Jeddah hosted the 32<sup>nd</sup> session of the Arab League summit on May 19, 2023, in the presence of a considerable number Arab leaders and representatives. There was a mood of optimism and much hope that its outcome and recommendations would positively assist in addressing several challenges and crises in the Middle East — primarily the Palestinian issue, the armed clashes in Sudan, and the readmission of Syria into the Arab League after a 12-year absence. There are also other sensitive issues such as the crises in Libya and Yemen, and the vacant presidential position in Lebanon. The summit concluded with Arab leaders accepting the items of the concluding statement and Bahrain was chosen to host the league's 33<sup>rd</sup> session.

In this position paper, we attempt to provide an analysis of the summit in terms of its timing, the role of the hosting nation, discussion points and objectives. This will be done through providing answers to a critical question: what distinguished this summit distinct from past ones? This summit was held at a time when the region and the world are witnessing crises and challenges that pose a danger to peace and security and it coincided with concerted Saudi efforts to enhance its diplomatic role and create the conditions for a new Arab order based on ending disputes, reconstruction, investment and safeguarding common interests. The summit also aimed to change the course of regional and global events in order to help resolve the ongoing disputes.

The position paper is divided into a number of sections that discuss the regional and global contexts in which the summit was held as well as Saudi Arabia's role in enhancing regional security and bringing Arab states together. The paper also sheds light on the summit's agenda and the issues discussed, as well as its significations and messages to the region and beyond. Finally, the challenges facing the summit's outcomes are analyzed.

### **The Environment and Timing of the Arab League Summit**

The Arab League summit was held amid exceptional regional political developments, challenges and circumstances. The summit came only a few days after the Israeli military escalation in the Gaza Strip which resulted in the killing of at least 34 Palestinians, including Islamic Jihad commanders, women and children. After the far-right took power in Israel, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel has intensified its attacks on the Palestinians and has ramped up the construction of settlements, which contradicts the international efforts to implement the two-state solution, considered to be the only viable solution to the problem between the two sides.

The summit also occurred against the backdrop of the armed clashes since April 15, 2023, in Sudan between the Sudanese army led by Lieutenant General Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagaló (Hemedti). The clashes broke out after differences over the integration of the RSF into the Sudanese military. The clashes have resulted in the deaths of hundreds, with thousands injured. In addition, infrastructure in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum has been destroyed. Since the crisis unfolded, Saudi Arabia has made extensive efforts to mediate between the two warring parties, most recently illustrated by the talks it hosted between the two sides, which resulted in the Jeddah Declaration. It stipulates the commitment to protect civilians in Sudan, maintain the country's sovereignty and preserve its unity and territorial integrity. In addition, via the declaration, the two parties agreed that the interests and safety of the Sudanese people must be ensured; safe passage must be provided for civilians to leave the Sudanese regions hit by hostilities; children must

not be recruited and deployed in the conflict; and the wounded must be evacuated without discrimination through humanitarian organizations.

The extensive efforts by Saudi Arabia to resolve the Yemeni crisis, reaching a historic rapprochement agreement with Iran in March that ended seven years of diplomatic rupture between the two countries, the Arab diplomatic moves to rekindle ties with Syria, which Saudi Arabia facilitated recently by convincing Arab leaders to readmit Damascus into the Arab League, clearly reflect that there is a stronger political will to resolve Arab crises amid accelerating regional and global changes. There is also a desire to usher in a new phase of joint Arab action.

Globally, the Arab summit occurred against the backdrop of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, which has contributed to easing the Western policy of polarization against the region's countries. The United States and Europe have shifted their entire attention — and resources — to counter Russia, which has prompted the region's countries to transition from the policy of aligning with certain camps to easing tensions amongst themselves.

As a result of the aforementioned, the Arab street pinned much hope on the Jeddah Summit, believing it would lead to a radical transformation in the Arab League's role in the coming period, turning it into a body that brings Arabs together and assists in overcoming the security, political and economic challenges that the Arab world is facing.

### **The Summit's Hosting Nation and Its Role in Enhancing Regional Security**

What set apart the Jeddah Arab League summit this year was that Saudi Arabia hosted the summit amid delicate circumstances that have shifted regional and global balance of power equations. This hosting was coupled with genuine Saudi efforts before the summit to find off-ramp solutions to regional disputes in line with the country's regional and international role. This role is focused on achieving regional stability and security in line with Saudi Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia hopes to leverage its political, economic and strategic influence and adopt a zero-problem approach and conclude agreements to settle the outstanding issues in several Arab spheres. This focus will help in easing regional tensions and settle more disputes between Arab and regional actors in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, not to mention laying the foundations for new equations within these countries to end political and sectarian disputes and transition them to a new phase based on nation-state building and establishing economic relations. This reflects Saudi Arabia's aim to achieve regional security and stability.

Saudi Arabia's city of Jeddah hosted the Arab League summit in light of the region ushering in a new phase characterized by Saudi Arabia signing a landmark security agreement with Iran which was brokered by China. The three countries, which signed a joint statement in Beijing, seem intent on rendering the agreement successful by restoring diplomatic ties and identifying off-ramp solutions for many regional disputes and issues. China's brokering of the agreement between the two regional heavyweights has enabled it to achieve a major breakthrough in the Middle East and this cannot be viewed as disconnected from its battle with the United States over global leadership. This agreement helps in realizing the country's aim of achieving regional peace and security.

In addition, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is undergoing historic transformations, with it looking for different options in its international relations — both regionally and globally — and ways to strengthen its tools to exert influence both regionally and globally, in addition, it is looking to accumulate further powerful levers to meet its aims. This is

happening at a time when the global stage is experiencing major geopolitical transformations and cutthroat global disputes between major world powers over regional leadership. Given the fact that it possesses multiple tools to exert influence and extensive resources that are of interest to the disputing global powers, Saudi Arabia has a historic opportunity to play a bigger regional and global role — especially given its awareness of the importance of playing a bigger role to settle regional disputes and entrench its standing.

The Saudi leadership was keen to come up with a concluding statement that was different from those issued at past summits. The Jeddah summit's communique indicates strategic transformations in the essence of Arab rhetoric in general and Saudi rhetoric in particular. This is reflective of a Saudi desire to build a consensus on the need for Arab solidarity to counter the challenges facing the Arab region; hence the summit was expected to be one of renewal and change. The communique also reflects the point that Saudi Arabia is no longer seeking rhetorical statements to address Arab issues but realizes that there is a necessity to reach practical and realistic solutions within the framework of Arab initiatives and paradigms. Thus, what the Arab countries pledged to do will necessitate the existence of serious follow-up mechanisms to ensure that they are met to counter challenges and address crises. Therefore, much hope was pinned on this summit, with a sense that it would mark a major transformation in outcomes at the regional and global levels.

### **Pivotal and Crucial Issues on the Jeddah Summit's Agenda**

There were several issues on the Arab League summit's agenda in Jeddah, primarily the Palestinian issue. The summit reiterated the importance of this issue and the special place it has in Arab countries. Contrary to many analyses that have suggested that Saudi Arabia will normalize relations with Israel, following in the footsteps of some Arab countries, the summit reiterated the necessity of resolving the Palestinian issue based on international conventions — serving as points of reference — such as the Arab Peace Initiative, the related international resolutions and principles of international law to ensure the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state according to the 1967 borders and with Eastern Jerusalem as its capital. The Arab summit's reiteration of these points of reference indicates the failure of Israeli attempts to detach the Palestinian issue from the Arab fold.

Furthermore, the Sudanese crisis was among the most important issues on the summit's agenda. The summit reiterated the necessity of quelling tensions, prioritizing dialogue, uniting the country, relieving the suffering inflicted on the people of Sudan, preserving national institutions and preventing their collapse, and working to avoid any outside interference in Sudanese affairs that could foment further disputes and threaten regional peace and security. The summit also considered the meeting between the Sudanese warring parties in Jeddah as an important step that could be built upon to end the crisis, restore security and stability in Sudan and protecting the people's resources.

As for Syria, it participated in the Jeddah summit; its first involvement in an Arab League session since 2011. Back then, Syria's membership in the Arab League was suspended and all Arab countries withdrew their ambassadors from Damascus and imposed political and economic sanctions on it in response to the Syrian government crackdown on the protests and demonstrations that had spread across the country. The Syrian crisis

had grave consequences on the region, with the deployment of militias, the escalation of terrorism, the displacement of Syrians and an increase in drug trafficking.

Syria's participation in the summit is of particular significance given the major shifts in the country's relations with a number of Arab countries in recent times. These shifts are part of Arab efforts to unite the Arab house and end divisions on the Syrian issue by re-integrating Syria back into the Arab fold. However, there is a conviction that the global complexities necessitate more intra-Arab coordination. Syria plays an important role in regional issues and has good ties with Tehran and Moscow, two influential players that exert considerable influence on Arab issues.

The Yemeni issue was also accorded utmost priority at the summit and it was referred to in the speeches of Arab leaders as well as in the concluding communique. The summit asserted the importance of assisting the Yemeni parties to arrive at a comprehensive, peaceful resolution to end the crisis. It also condemned the use of disputes to achieve political ends, the formation of armed militias beyond state control and outside interferences that have inflicted nothing on Yemen but disputes and discord among the people of Yemen. The summit also emphasized the positive impact of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement agreement on the Yemeni crisis. The Yemeni delegation at the summit called for state institutions to be supported and for pressure to be exerted on the Houthis to allow ships to access Yemeni ports. It praised Saudi Arabia's role in deterring the threats besetting the Arab world and bringing Arabs together and also its tireless efforts along with Oman to resurrect the truce which the Yemeni government unilaterally complied with — in order to deprive the Houthis of any chance to reignite the dispute and to stave off the resumption of an all-out escalation.

The summit also lauded the Saudi-Iran agreement to restore diplomatic ties and the revival of the previously signed security and economic cooperation deals between the two countries. The impact of this agreement has been evident on the Yemeni and Syrian arenas. The Saudi-Iran deal will play an important role in settling disputes in the region. In this vein, it is worth noting that in a series of tweets the Arab League chief praised the Saudi-Iran deal shortly after its signing, and reiterated its role in helping to achieve some degree of stability in the region.

## **Significations of Holding the Summit and the Regional and Global Messages It Conveyed**

There are several significations and important messages that can be inferred from the summit based on the Arab regional moves preceding the summit as well as the nature of the issues and questions discussed during and after it. These can be reviewed as follows:

### **Arab Solidarity in the Face of the Challenges Gripping the Region**

The Jeddah summit's concluding statement reiterated strengthening solidarity among Arab countries in the face of the challenges and crises the region is witnessing. These crises, such as the Palestinian issue, the conflict in Yemen, the instability in Lebanon and Libya and the new crisis in Sudan, all have gained heightened attention. Yet the statement also affirmed the necessity of the region's countries ensuring security and stability and enhancing joint Arab action to protect Arab national security and end the

crises endured by some Arab countries. The summit supported the principle of rejecting foreign interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries.

### **Restoring the Arab League's Momentum and Joint Arab Action**

The Jeddah summit acquired added value, not only because of the readmittance of Syria, but also because of the fact that such a step is considered as clear proof of the restoration of the true essence of Arab solidarity and joint Arab action. This readmission was the outcome of the joint efforts of several leading Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Jordan. Their foreign ministers carried out tireless moves over the past period for this outcome.

### **The Arab League Summit Marked a Defining Moment in the Saudi Diplomatic Trajectory**

The presence of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy reflected Saudi Arabia's orientation based on asserting its independence and vision in the context of domestic and global affairs. This vision emanates only from Saudi concern for national and Arab interests and its role in positively impacting the course of global disputes, resolving international conflicts, and reversing the course of events regionally and globally. Regionally, Riyadh has recently played a leading diplomatic role and has attempted to find realistic resolutions to most of the region's thorny issues. Ahead of the summit, Riyadh laid out an initiative for reconciliation and negotiations between the warring factions in Sudan. Before this, Saudi Arabia welcomed Syria's return to the Arab fold as part of a clear Arab roadmap. It also restored ties with Iran and supported dialogue between the Yemeni factions to ease tensions, facilitate reconciliation, settle crises and create the conditions of a new Arab order that is based on cooperation, development, reconstruction investment, mutual trade and common interests.

Globally, Riyadh contributed to the conclusion of an agreement between Russia and Ukraine last December, which resulted in the exchange of prisoners. The presence of the Ukrainian president at the summit reflected the importance of Saudi Arabia on the global stage and its growing international influence. In addition, this reflected the fact that Saudi Arabia is an indispensable partner in terms of achieving regional security and stability. Zelenskyy's attendance occurred against the backdrop of the consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war as well as the global polarization that has now affected the region. For example, the Russia-Ukraine war has exacerbated the food and energy crisis and has impacted Arab security because of the international polarization. The cable sent by Russian President Vladimir Putin to the Arab leaders who partook in the Arab summit — in which he pointed to Russia's interest in boosting ties with Arab countries — is considered a proof of the summit's international dimension and the appreciation of Saudi efforts to host this landmark summit.

### **The Challenges Facing the Arab League Summit's Outcomes**

The Jeddah summit's outcomes face a host of challenges, and there is a need to ensure there are follow-up mechanisms for their implementation. These challenges include the following:

## **Bilateral Differences Among Arab Countries**

Bilateral differences among Arab countries have impacted the Arab League's work since it was established. Regional bickering that has overshadowed the effectiveness of the Arab body's decisions, obstructing their implementation. From this perspective, keeping differences at bay and drawing a line between the bilateral and collective aspects of relations will contribute to implementing the body's decisions, especially considering Saudi Arabia's capabilities and tools of influence at the regional and global levels.

## **Local Intricacies of Disputes**

Several local actors are engaged in disputes, whether in Syria, Yemen, Sudan or Libya. The achievement of settlements to end these disputes requires a unified Arab approach to put pressure on local actors and push them to take steps that are consistent with the summit's outcomes, which reiterated the importance of restoring stability in Arab countries and prioritized diplomatic efforts and peaceful resolutions involving the disputants to end the cycle of conflict. Reaching such outcomes necessitates extensive efforts on the part of the Arab League since all member countries seek to resolve the outstanding disputes. This collective concern has been reflected in the Sudanese which poses a grave danger to the Arab fold.

## **Role of Regional and Global Powers**

Regional and global powers, like Iran, Turkey, Israel, Ethiopia, the United States, Russia and others have fomented the disputes in the Arab world. Therefore, holding the recent Arab summit in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was important to neutralize the role of foreign actors and this also requires parallel trajectories that stem from within the Arab League. The Arab League's endeavors must also be supported with agreements and understandings like those recently reached between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Moreover, common interests between Arab countries and regional powers create balances that help to prevent any conflict or proxy wars in the region. This was highlighted in the speech of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the summit. Perhaps inviting President Zelenskyy to the summit was one of the indications of the new approaches embraced by the Arab League in general and Saudi Arabia in particular on the global stage. The Russia-Ukraine war has revealed that the neutral arenas could play an influential role, particularly as the major world powers are involved in a zero-sum game.

## **Conclusion**

In light of the summit's timing, significations, regional and global messages, it is apparent that the rhetoric of Arab countries in general and Saudi in particular saw a remarkable shift regarding Arab issues. It revealed a Saudi-sponsored intra-Arab desire to reset Arab relations and usher in a new stage of reconstruction, development and common interests — a phase totally different from the previous one. It is worth noting that the summit highlighted Arab consensus on resolving Arab issues within the Arab sphere, rejecting regional and international interventions in Arab disputes while at the same time asserting the decisive Arab role in resolving crises, not to mention declaring a collective Arab desire to bring to a halt the current global approach of addressing the Palestinian issue. The global approach views the issue as exclusively a humanitarian cause, while the summit reiterated that it is a political issue, the resolution of which requires establishing a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders. More importantly, the



host, during the summit appeared to possess all the necessary tools to exert influence to implement and follow up on the summit's outcomes, particularly to find off-ramp solutions to the unresolved Arab issues. Saudi Arabia is not only capable of settling regional crises and disputes but it is also capable of engaging in international efforts to settle the ongoing global wars and disputes.



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