

## THE ROLE OF THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS – THE POSITION OF SERBIA

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*Abstract:* This paper examines the status of a regional organization – the League of Arab States (LAS) or the Arab League (AL), which gathers Arab countries in the region of Africa and Western Asia. As a very specific international organization with its own institutional structure, the AL is focused on realizing the interests of the Arab states, starting from the protection of their sovereignty and political independence to the establishment of various forms of international cooperation. Particular emphasis in the work is placed on the relations between Serbia and the AL. Serbia enjoys observer status in this regional organization. Since 2009, the most intense interaction between Serbia and the AL happened during the dramatic time of the “Arab Spring”, which profoundly changed the Arab political landscape. The first period is related to the attempt at democratization and regime change in Arab countries. The second period is related to foreign intervention and wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The third period is associated with events related to the rise of the terrorist organization ISIS in the Arab region – from Iraq to Morocco. During the last mentioned period, Serbia actively worked on strengthening its presence in the AL and providing true information to its member states about the situation in the Balkans.

*Keywords:* League of Arab States, Arab League, regional organization, Serbia, Arab spring.

### INTRODUCTION

The Arab League, formally the League of Arab States (Arabic: Jāmi‘at ad-Duwal al-‘Arabiyya), is a regional organization in the Arab world, which

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is located in Northern Africa, Western Africa, Eastern Africa, and Western Asia. The AL was formed in Cairo on March 22, 1945, initially with six members: Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan (renamed Jordan in 1949), Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Yemen joined as a member on May 5, 1945. Currently, the League has 22 members (Arab League Summit, 2013, March 21-27). Countries that joined later are: Algeria (1962), Bahrain (1971), the Comoros (1993), Djibouti (1977), Kuwait (1961), Libya (1953), Mauritania (1973), Morocco (1958), Oman (1971), Qatar (1971), Somalia (1974), Southern Yemen (1967), Sudan (1956), Tunisia (1958), and the United Arab Emirates (1971). The Palestine Liberation Organization was admitted in 1976. In January 2003, Eritrea joined the AL as an observer. Egypt's membership was suspended in 1979 after it signed a peace treaty with Israel; the league's headquarters was moved from Cairo, Egypt, to Tunis, Tunisia (Bisenić, 2018). In 1987, Arab leaders decided to renew diplomatic ties with Egypt. Egypt was readmitted to the league in 1989 and the league's headquarters was moved back to Cairo. Libya was suspended from the AL on February 22, 2011. On August 27, 2011, the AL voted to restore Libya's membership by accrediting a representative of the National Transitional Council, which was partially recognized as the interim government of the country in the wake of Gaddafi's ouster from the capital of Tripoli. On November 12, 2011, the League passed a decree that would suspend Syria's membership if the government failed to stop violence against civilian protestors by November 16 amidst the uprising. Despite this, the government did not yield to the League's demands. While the League has actively used sanctions in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it has no record of employing sanctions against its own member states for matters that pertain to upholding democratic governance or human rights. Article 18 of the Arab Pact to establish the LAS does allow for the possibility to suspend member states by unanimous vote if the state is in violation of the treaty's obligations. However, Article 8 also clearly lays out that "each member-state shall respect the systems of government established in the other member-states and regard them as exclusive concerns of those states. Each shall pledge to abstain from any action calculated to change established systems of government". The League's main goal is to "draw closer the relations between the member states and coordinate collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries" (*Ibidem*). Through institutions, notably the AL Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) and the Economic and Social Council of its Council of Arab Economic Unity (CAEU), the League facilitates political, economic,

cultural, scientific, and social programs designed to promote the interests of the Arab world. It has served as a forum for the member states to coordinate policy, arrange studies and committees on matters of common concern, settle inter-state disputes, and limit conflicts such as the 1958 Lebanon crisis. The League has served as a platform for the drafting and conclusion of many landmark documents promoting economic integration. One example is the Joint Arab Economic Action Charter, which outlines the principles for economic activities in the region. Each member state has one vote in the Council of the Arab League, and decisions are binding only for those states that have voted for them. The aims of the league in 1945 were to strengthen and coordinate the political, cultural, economic, and social programs of its members and to mediate disputes among them or between them and third parties. Furthermore, the signing of an agreement on Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation on April 13, 1950, committed the signatories to coordination of military defense measures.

### **THE ARAB LEAGUE IN THE PERIOD 2011-2018**

The period from 2011 to 2018 was marked by great turbulence in the Arab world. They included mass protests and popular movements that led to the fall of decades-old rulers in the Arab world – Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. Mass movements led to internal conflicts and later wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The causes, course, and outcome of the conflicts in these countries were different. In Libya, Muammar al-Gaddafi was overthrown and brutally liquidated after a Western military intervention approved by the UN Security Council. Despite all the rallies outside and inside, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad remained in power, Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh resigned in 2012 after 22 years in power, and the country plunged into a civil war, first followed by Saudi intervention and then other Gulf and Arab states in order to prevent the spread of Shiite (Iranian) influence in the country. These wars were joined by the conflict in Iraq, where the Islamic State has been active since 2014, creating its own “caliphate” that included neighboring Syria, so Iraq and Syria were the central battlefields where the fight against terrorism and the Islamic State was fought for the next few years. At the same time, two other countries, Sudan and Somalia, have faced internal conflicts, with almost a third of the AL members facing structural problems that have brought them to the brink of “failed states”. Far too many countries have become “failed states” in ways that go beyond the threat posed by Iran, extremism, and ethnic and sectarian divisions. They have failed to make adequate progress in civil and

economic reforms, and they have stopped short of reducing corruption and incompetence in national politics and governance (Cordesman, 2020, p. 34). In such circumstances, it was very difficult and complicated for the AL to maintain the required degree of unity and functionality of the organization. In 2009, Marco Pinfari analyzed the AL mediation attempts in the Middle East since 1945. His findings are sobering.

Although the AL mediated 12 out of 20 minor regional conflicts in that time frame, it was involved in only seven of 36 major interstate wars. Also, the league intervened in only five of 22 major civil wars. Most notably, the organization failed to come up with a unified response to the 1990 Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, the ensuing Gulf War, and the 2003 Iraq War. The league voted to impose a no-fly zone over Libya, but its attempts to broker a cease-fire in Syria failed to have any impact. Regardless of that, the LAS is a very important diplomatic partner for Serbia. The Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia in Cairo is accredited to the LAS and responsible for maintaining contact with the bodies of the LAS. The Credential letter was delivered to the Secretary-General of the Arab League, H.E. Nabil El Arabi, on February 6, 2012. The main message was that Serbia continues to affirm that the role played by the AL is crucial to the promotion of regional peace and security and to the maintenance of international legal order. Because of the influence that the AL exercises on global stability and prosperity, Serbia has an abiding interest in further strengthening its relations with the AL in all areas of common interest. The Serbian side re-affirmed the political, economic, and cultural bonds that exist between the Republic of Serbia and Arab states and their peoples. Serbia reiterated its commitment to steer bilateral relations with all Arab states in accordance with the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, mutual respect and the UN Charter. It was emphasized that the need for working together and engaging in diverse fields, including security and development, would greatly contribute to peace and stability in the ME and in the Balkan region (Embassy of the Republic of Serbia, 2012).

The LAS has strong rules on non-intervention, sovereignty protection, and respect for territorial integrity. The Middle East has prominently been called a “region without regionalism” (Aarts, 1999), with its most prominent regional organization, the League of Arab States, being relatively weak in terms of influencing member states’ politics, providing public goods, or realizing collective decisions (Barnett & Solingen, 2007). This might be due to the fact that regional organizations in the Global South are often products of decolonization efforts and were therefore created to support newly

established regimes in their quest for independence and state-building (Acharya & Johnston, 2007; Bisenić, 2021). While regional institution-building in Europe was mostly pursued as a post-World War II project to curb nationalism and stimulate trade by transferring authority to supranational bodies, regional organizations in the Global South were built as weak intergovernmental institutions without the authority to interfere in domestic affairs (Acharya, 2016). While norms related to sovereignty and non-interference have taken various trajectories across the Global South (Coe, 2015; Hellquist, 2015), they still carry a lot of weight in the AL (Barnett & Solingen, 2007). As Barnett and Solingen conclude, the League's design is "the result of the clear imperative of regime survival that led Arab leaders to prefer weak regional institutions [that are] specifically designed to fail" (*Ibid.*, p. 181). Such attitudes have made the LAS an important interlocutor for Serbia in its efforts to preserve its own territorial integrity and maintain a permanent dialogue with Arab states on this issue. On the other hand, the LAS was an important and strategic target for the representatives of the self-proclaimed "independent Kosovo" in their efforts to change their attitudes towards this issue. Due to that, they tried to take an active part in the work of the LAS on numerous occasions, which they did not succeed in, despite the occasional strong lobbying of certain member states. The AL took a stand against the change of borders in the Middle East very early on. Thus, on March 21, 2016, she rejected the move of the Syrian Kurds to proclaim a federal unit in northern Syria. The statement states that: "The AL does not recognize the unilateral declaration of independence of the Kurds and rejects such separatist calls that threaten the unity of Syria", and also "stresses that the unity and territorial integrity of Syria are fundamental principles". It is further added that "the unity and territorial integrity of Syria is a basic principle" of the Arab League. Both the Damascus government and the main Syrian opposition grouping involved in UN-brokered peace negotiations in Geneva, the High Negotiations Committee, have also rejected this move by the Kurds and their allies. Washington has said it will not recognize any autonomous regions they set up under their planned federation and says that Syria's future system of government is something to be negotiated in the UN talks. But it has also said that it will continue to work closely with the Kurds, whom it regards as the most effective fighting force against the Islamic State jihadist group (Africa Cup of Nations, 2016, March 21).

## THE ARAB LEAGUE AND SERBIA ON THE ISSUE OF KOSOVO

One of the important topics in relation to the LAS was the issue of Kosovo. Since the headquarters of the AL is located in Cairo, the activities of the AL, although not directly conditioned by local events, largely interact with the atmosphere and political environment of Egypt. Cooperation and relations with the AL can be divided into three periods. It is the first since the beginning of the "Arab Spring" and the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (2011-2012). This period was marked by the provisional government exercised by the Supreme Military Council until the organization of the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012. The second period (2012-2013) covers the reign of the Muslim Brotherhood, which won both the presidential and parliamentary elections in Egypt. The third period is from 2013 to 2018, when the Muslim Brotherhood was overthrown and the interim government was established first. Then, in 2014, Field Marshal Abdelfattah El Sisi was elected president. This period was marked by the rise and fall of the caliphate of the terrorist Islamic State, which was a threat to the entire Middle East and the Arab world. New trends in the activities of the AL could be noticed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Vuk Jeremić, who was on a working visit to Egypt on April 5, 2012, and on that occasion met with the Secretary General of the AL, Nabil el Arabi. In an open and meaningful conversation, the interlocutors exchanged views on the most important issues in the field of international processes in the world. The main topics were the situation in the Middle East region, cooperation between Serbia and the AL, as well as activities in the Non-Aligned Movement. (Embassy of the Republic of Serbia, 2012, April 4).

At that time, there was a mood in the AL that the rule of Bashar al-Assad in Syria could not "last forever" and it was based on the need for quick changes. Although the AL has been strongly engaged in resolving this conflict, as the AL resolutions are not binding, there is an impression of insufficient League engagement. In addition, the Syrian conflict is seen as a manifestation of Iran's negative regional role because it interferes with the internal affairs of certain Arab countries. Serbia was preparing to participate in the meeting of the Coordination of Non-Aligned Persons, which is planned for the beginning of May in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el Sheik. Last year in September, a commemorative gathering was held in Belgrade on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Non-Aligned Movement and the first summit held in Belgrade in 1961. Since the beginning of the changes in the Arab world caused by the "Arab Spring", visits of Kosovo Albanian delegations to Cairo and efforts to use the

potential of the AL for their goals, and especially for wider acceptance and recognition of Kosovo's independence, have increased. In that, they relied especially on the resources of some countries that became very influential in the Arab world after the "Arab Spring" and on the capacities of the "Muslim Brotherhood" and the organizations that were in their network. The position of the AL was that the attitude towards the JPNK is a special matter for each member of the AL, and that the AL itself as an organization has no mandate to get involved in similar issues. It was confirmed that the delegations of the so-called Republic of Kosovo during their stay in Egypt also visited the AL, where they were received by officials of this organization, but only to be heard, while the AL cannot promise anyone recognition or a certain position of the member state. The inclusion of "Kosovo" in the Syrian conflict and claims that Kosovo has become a training center for the Syrian opposition have attracted special attention. Namely, at the session of the UN Security Council held on May 14, 2012, the Russian ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, warned the UN Security Council that Kosovo should not be allowed to become a training center for rebels. Churkin made it clear that Moscow was afraid that Kosovo was providing more than political advice. "Turning Kosovo into an international training center for insurgents of various armed units could become a serious destabilizing factor, one going beyond the Balkan region," he said. "We call on international presences operating in Kosovo to curb such slippage" (Charbonneau, 2012). Kosovo voiced strong support for Syria's opposition in 2012. Speaking after a regular council meeting on Kosovo, Enver Hoxhaj made it clear that Priština was offering political support to the Syrian opposition. "We were among the first governments in Europe to support the opposition in Libya and other Arab countries last year because we were fighting for the same aspirations, for the same values," he said. "We have the same approach to Syria and have some diplomatic contacts between my government and (the) Syrian opposition", Hoxhaj said. "We are supporting very much their cause." (*Ibidem*) (Kosovo voices strong support for Syria's opposition). The AL officials then noticed in the GS UN report on the work of UMNİK that the UN General Assembly had criticized the so-called authorities of the Republic of Kosovo, which was the first time.

### **ATTITUDE OF THE ARAB LEAGUE TOWARDS THE SITUATION IN SYRIA**

In early March, Arab foreign ministers gathered at the 137th session of the AL to discuss, among other things, the situation in Syria in light of efforts

by Arab and Western countries to increase pressure on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also attended the meeting. (Ezzat, 2012, March 11). The Russian minister clearly expressed his support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and opposed the actions of "armed groups". Russia and China in 2011 used vetoes twice to block Western and Western-Arab drafted resolutions calling on the Syrian regime to end the violence it has been exercising against the opposition. Lavrov was still not committed to reversing his country's opposition to an Arab initiative based on a power transition from Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to his vice president. As Lavrov said, "Russia does not protect any regime, it only protects international law. When it comes to Syria, the urgent task is to stop the violence, no matter where the source of that violence is (as pointed out in the AL initiative of November 7, 2011) and allow the delivery of humanitarian aid, freely and expeditiously, to all who need it. If everyone agrees with this, then there is really no need to engage in discussions about who is to blame", said Lavrov (*Ibidem*). At the conclusion of his presentation, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that Russia views cooperation with the AL and its members as a strategic task. To that end, the Arab-Russian Forum of Cooperation was established, the first meeting of which was supposed to be held last year, but also due to changes in the "Arab Spring". It was agreed within the AL that the meeting of the Forum would be held this year. Immediately after the speech of the Russian Minister, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Qatar and Saudi Arabia spoke. Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin-Jasim al-Thani, said it was time to send Arab and international troops to Syria. Addressing the Russian minister, he pointed out that the rebels who are fighting for the arrest of President Assad must not be called "armed groups", because they are forced to defend themselves from the systematic killings carried out by the Syrian authorities. According to him, the cessation of the conflict is not enough and those responsible for the violence must be held accountable. He also demanded freedom of access to the media and humanitarian aid, as well as the release of prisoners. The Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, said that the Russian-Chinese veto on the UN resolution condemning Syria allowed the Damascus regime to continue its brutality against the Syrian people without pity and mercy (*Ibidem*). Three days before the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, on June 26, 2013, through a statement of a spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Egypt, the recognition of Kosovo was announced. This verbal confession was the result of some internal calculations of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as external pressures to which they were subject. The government of President



Mohammed Morsi believed that recognition could help the government survive. The AL officials confirmed that the AU did not raise the issue of the JPNK in 2013, nor did it consider the possibility of submitting a resolution by the countries that put pressure on other members. The same official believes that Serbia should not pay much attention to the Egyptian recognition of the JPNK, which was done in the last moments of the rule of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, but we should let time pass when Egypt will probably make a new decision. The AL did not put on the agenda the events in Egypt around the removal of President Mohamed Morsi and the arrest of the members of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, most AL member states, except Qatar, supported change in Egypt. The Secretary-General of the Arab League, Dr. Nabil al-Arabi, sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Ivan Mrkić, in which he requested the support of the Republic of Serbia for the draft resolution "Nuclear capabilities of Israel". The development of the situation in Syria was therefore of special interest to Serbia.

#### **OTHER ISSUES OF CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES**

Until the end of 2013, there were clear signals of coming military intervention in this country led by the US and allies. In September of the same year, there was an impression that military action was imminent, but at the last moment, this action was avoided. To some extent, Russia's intervention in connection with the UN inspection of Syrian chemical facilities contributed to this. As expected, the Syrian crisis dominated the Doha Summit, regular and extraordinary ministerial meetings within the Arab League, as well as meetings of the AL's permanent representatives in 2013. This was the most critical issue, with serious and unpredictable consequences for the entire Middle East, given the involvement of external actors with strategic interests in the region (Ezzat, 2013, March 25). In his speech, AL Secretary-General Nabil al-Arabi warned that the conflict in Syria would have far-reaching consequences for the entire region, accusing the Assad regime of failing to intervene. According to him, the political solution to the Syrian crisis is the only solution that needs to be implemented. However, on the first day, the summit participants passed a resolution giving member states the "right" to offer all means of self-defense, including weapons, in support of the resistance of the Syrian people and the Free Syrian Army. According to Egyptian SJI reports, Damascus has criticized the Arab League's move to allow the opposition to take Syria's

place, describing it as a cheap sale of Arab identity to satisfy Israel and the United States (*Ibidem*). This issue can be divided into two parts. The first and most important is related to economic cooperation and integration within the Arab world. In the past, the issue of economic cooperation has been treated from an ideological and pan-Arab perspective, devoid of any serious content or commitment. The second issue has to do with the overall reforms of the Arab League's institutional system. This includes the establishment of the Arab Court of Human Rights – an issue that until recently was considered a taboo topic in Arab multilateral diplomacy (Arab League Summit, 2013, March 21-27). Despite the assessment by many that the unity of the Arab countries is at its lowest level in the past almost seven decades since the founding of the League, compromise formulations were found (Bröning, 2014). Regional polarization in the wake of the Arab Spring, which has pitted supporters of the uprisings, such as Tunisia, against defenders of the status quo, such as Saudi Arabia and (increasingly) Egypt, is part of the problem. Another point of contention is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has recently been labeled a “terrorist organization” by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. However, Qatar, the Brotherhood's regional sponsor, continues to support it, and political parties affiliated with the group still hold power or have significant political influence in Tunisia, Morocco, and the Gaza Strip. Syria is another highly divisive issue, with different member states effectively supporting different sides in the civil war. And the body remains divided between those who fear Iran and those with more benign views of it, namely, Lebanon and Iraq. Thanks to these disagreements, the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates refused to even attend the summit. Theirs, however, were not the only seats that remained empty. Algeria and Iraq insisted that the Syrian opposition not be allowed to represent Damascus officially (although Ahmad al-Jarba, the head of the Syrian National Coalition, was invited to address the gathering). And the countries that did attend might as well not have. The summit mainly served as an opportunity for speakers to exchange thinly veiled criticism and accusations of regional destabilization. Even though officials inevitably hailed the “successful summit” and its “tangible results”, their rhetoric could not conceal the fact that the meeting was just another reminder of the league's inability to stay relevant in the nearly 70 years since its founding (Bröning, 2014). Among other activities, attention is drawn to the detailed project of planned activities on the formation of joint pan-Arab rapid reaction forces, which is very detailed and conceived, although it is uncertain when the establishment of these forces could really begin, given all the doubts and obstacles that should be removed (who will command and who

will give troops, where they will be stationed, contributions, authorizations, etc.). Lack of unity is a permanent challenge to the AL. In a sense, escalating tensions with Iran and the unprecedented rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham did energize the AL during 2015. The process of forming the Joint Arab Force (JAF) was supported at the 26th Summit of Arab Leaders in Sharm el-Sheikh in March 2015. The process was then worked out with the help of military experts and the Chief of General Staff. The agreement between the KSA and Qatar was frozen in late August ahead of a final meeting of foreign and defense ministers without explanation. But some skepticism is in order about the new force's ability to serve as a pillar of regional stability (Bröning, 2015).

In March 2015, the AL General-Secretary announced the establishment of a Joint Arab Force (JAF) with the goal of counteracting extremism and other threats to the Arab States. The decision was reached while Operation Decisive Storm was intensifying in Yemen. Participation in the project is voluntary, and the army intervenes only at the request of one of the member states. Heightened military arsenals in many member states and, in a small minority, civil wars as well as terrorist movements were the impetus for the JAF, financed by the rich Gulf countries. This project has evolved into another concept – the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) – during the presidency of Donald Trump. The MESA is also known as the Arab NATO, since aggression against any of its member states constitutes aggression against all of its parties. The principle of collective security referred to in the Riyadh Declaration was issued following the Arab-American-Islamic Summit hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from May 20 to 21, 2017 (Saudi Press Agency, 2017, May 22). The participants included leaders of 55 nations, including US President Donald Trump. It was Trump's first foreign trip since he took office as US president. The proposal was approved by the 55 nations participating in the summit. According to the remarks of US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Gulf Affairs Tim Lenderking, the Arab NATO includes nine members: the United States, the Gulf Cooperation Council states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar), Egypt, and Jordan. The Alliance focuses on the military, political, and economic spheres (Boylan, 2018). The aim of the Arab NATO is to strengthen military cooperation among member states in order to build a strong shield against the threats facing the Arabian Gulf. In particular, to shield the region from growing Iranian threats and rising waves of terrorism, as well as to bring security and stability to Syria and Yemen, and to offer support to Iraq (*Ibidem*). In other words, the Arab NATO is meant to create a balance of power and to build a force of deterrence as

well as a joint defense system to stand up to Iranian threats in the Middle East by countering them politically, militarily, and economically to stop Iran's expansion in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. This is in addition to countering the transfer of arms between Iran and its militias in the region, especially the weapons being transferred to Hezbollah in Syria. Washington believes that although there are some differences among the supposed members, coordination among them is not impossible.

### CHANGED INTERNATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND THE ARAB LEAGUE

In March 2016, former Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Geith was elected as the new Secretary-General of the AL. The Foreign Minister of Serbia, Ivica Dačić, congratulated him on his election and especially thanked him for his views on the condemnation of the FRY bombing in 1999. Abul Geith responded to Minister Dačić and wished for even better relations between Serbia and the AL. This year, an unusual request from "Kosovo" to attend and appear at the meeting of the Ministerial Council of the AL in September of that year also appeared. This request did not even enter the procedure, as the member states that did not recognize "Kosovo" did not accept this possibility. Morocco refused to host the 27th session of the Arab League, which was supposed to be held on March 29, 2016, in Marrakesh and which, according to the proposal of Saudi Arabia, was supposed to be postponed to April 7th of the same year. Morocco finds the reason for refusing to organize the 27th annual session in the fact that they do not want to "create the impression of the false unity of the Arab world". Mauritania stressed its readiness to host the 27th AL Summit in July 2016. The expected topics of the upcoming summit in Mauritania were the crisis in Yemen as well as the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Palestine. Sudanese President Bashir stated that he would lead the delegation of the Republic of Sudan at the summit in Mauritania, since it is not a member of the Rome Statute. On March 21, 2016, the AL rejected the move of the Syrian Kurds to proclaim a federal unit in northern Syria. On March 16-17, 2016, the Kurds and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) announced the federal system in northern Syria (Al-monitor, 2017, October 27; BBC, 2017, September 27). The AL therefore did not recognize the unilateral proclamation of the Kurds and rejected such separatist calls that threatened the unity of Syria, and the AL emphasized that the unity and territorial integrity of Syria were the fundamental principles. This was an important step toward clear and firm rejection of new divisions and destruction of Arab states, which changed

the attitude of Arab countries toward similar cases – notably toward “Kosovo”. In April 2016, the Secretary-General of the League received the French envoy, Vimont, and the talks were in the direction of resuming the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks. The French side’s efforts to hold an international peace conference to resume talks between the Palestinians and Israel were welcomed. On that occasion, the GS AL expressed hope for the success of the conference on ending the Israeli occupation and establishing a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. In April 2016, the AL and Egypt jointly condemned the statement of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on the Golan Heights and pointed out that it is a part of the territory of Syria that was occupied by Israel in 1967. The President of the Arab Republic of Egypt, Abdel Fattah el Sisi, announced an extraordinary summit of the AL at the level of foreign ministers, with Bahrain as chairman, for May 28, 2016, with the aim of adopting a common position of the Arab states for the Paris Conference on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The wish of President Sisi was that after a few years of neglecting the launch, the Palestinian issue would be resolved and welcomed by Tel Aviv, as well as by Ramallah and Gaza. Official Cairo was also ready to mediate in the reconciliation of Fatah and Hamas in order to reach a peace agreement with Israel. At the AL session held on May 28, the GS AL did not spare Israel, and on that occasion, a resolution was adopted that referred to the need for the AL for the French initiative and the necessity of stopping the settlement of the Palestinian territories. The topics of the session were also the situation in Libya and full support for Prime Minister-designate Fayez al-Saraz, negotiations in Yemen and preparations for the AL Summit in Mauritania. The Arab–African Summit held in Malabo in November 2016 (Equatorial Guinea) was marked by an incident because of the South Sahara flag, which was shown at the gathering (Africa-Arab Summit, 2016, November 23). Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE withdrew from the summit after the participation of the so-called “Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic”. Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Jordan, Yemen, and Somalia signaled their support and abandonment of the summit, canceling their participation, primarily due to the flag of the separatist entity, which was understood as a “flagrant violation of the country’s territorial integrity and national sovereignty” (Anadolu Agency, 2016, November 22). Very good relations have been established with the AL after the election of Mr. Ahmed Aboul Geith. This was of particular importance when, in the middle of 2017, with the help of Saudi Arabia, “Kosovo” MFA Enver Hoxhaj repeatedly tried to gain attendance at the AL Ministerial Meeting. With the help and support of the AL leadership, and then direct opposition from Sudan, this attempt was

thwarted. People living in northern Iraq voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence for the Kurdistan Region in Monday's controversial referendum. The electoral commission said 92 percent of the 3.3 million Kurds and non-Kurds who cast their ballots supported secession. The announcement came despite a last-minute appeal for the result to be "cancelled" by Iraq's prime minister. The AL has taken a clear position on the Kurdish call for independence. "Today the Kurds are calling for a State of their own... why not the Yazidis, why not the Pashtuns, why not the Assyrians, why not lots of others?" said the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, in his opening speech at the NATO Defense College Foundation's conference on Arab geopolitics in Rome, Italy (Astorri, 2017). "History teaches us that separation and division create more violence and sometimes also ethnic cleansing", explained Gheit, mentioning the Balkans' experience as an example. "There is no room for an exclusive political process. Only an inclusive political process can bring people together and defend the nation-states. Fragmentation is not the answer", said Gheit, addressing the NATO audience in Rome. "Decentralization is a key measure that should be implemented, as central governments should give some autonomy to local communities", the Secretary-General said. The Kurdish bid for autonomy was not welcomed by Iraq's central government, Turkey, or Iran. Not even the United States, which is considered the Kurds' closest ally, supported the referendum, fearing instability and a decreased focus on fighting ISIS. "The focus, which used to be like a laser beam on ISIS, is now not 100 percent there, so there has been an effect on the overall mission to defeat ISIS in Iraq as a result of the referendum," said Colonel Ryan Dillon, spokesman of the US-led coalition fighting ISIS (*Ibidem*). According to Gheit, the nation-state cannot be changed as it is the basic structure of the Arab order, but sovereignty alone is not enough to enhance regional stability. "State sovereignty is not enough as a guiding principle for a stable regional order. State sovereignty should be coupled with good governance and economic viability. Sovereignty alone cannot keep states away from disintegrating and fragmenting", Gheit said. (*Ibidem*; Alarabiya News, 2017, October 6). The Secretary-General of the AL was awarded for merits in Egypt's attitude towards Kosovo while he was the MFA of Egypt. The decoration was handed over by the special envoy of the President of Serbia at the ceremony on the occasion of the Statehood Day of Serbia, which was held in Cairo (Embassy of the Republic of Serbia, 2018, February 23).

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite all the problems the AL faced during this very turbulent period, cooperation with Serbia was at a very high level and marked by a strong spirit of mutual respect and friendship. Serbia has very successfully achieved all its goals in cooperation with the AL, with great understanding and support from the AL leadership. When it comes to international law and the fundamental principles of interstate relations, it turns out that the AL and Serbia are on the same page: respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as non-interference in the internal affairs of states. The ideological approach was completely ruled out, and the positions taken by the AL on these issues in the Arab region were a strong argument for Serbia's position. Therefore, the strengthening of relations with the AL, where there are wide possibilities for contractual definition of these relations, remains an important direct task of Serbian diplomacy.

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