



Symbolic Democracy, Strategic Autocracy: The Arab League's Politics of Legitimacy

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Abstract

This case study examines the role of the League of Arab States (LAS) in the EU Southern Neighbourhood, particularly in the realms of democracy and autocracy support. While the LAS has developed instruments and discourses aligned with democratic principles – such as election observation, human rights charters, and governance reforms – its actions often reflect symbolic gestures rather than substantive commitments. The 2011 Arab uprisings serve as a pivotal moment to assess the League’s dual approach: proactive and interventionist in Libya and Syria under the guise of humanitarianism and democracy, yet passive or complicit in Bahrain and Yemen, aligning with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) interests to suppress democratic movements. The study argues that the LAS’s engagement is shaped less by normative commitments to democracy and more by the strategic interests of dominant member states, particularly GCC monarchies. Ultimately, the League’s actions reveal a pattern of authoritarian collaboration masked by pro-democracy rhetoric, aimed at regime survival and regional stability rather than genuine democratic transformation.

Introduction¹

The League of Arab States (LAS) was founded on 22 March 1945 to bring together Arab states sharing a common culture and history and ensure their cooperation in fields of common interest. This regional organisation’s aim is to coordinate political activities between member states, ensure their collaboration in areas of common interest such as economics, culture and communication, and project an image of unity amongst Arab member states (Masters and Sergie, 2014). Nowadays it includes 22 member states: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria (suspended between 2011 and 2023), Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

Born in a context marked by the end of World War II, the creation of the UN, the escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and conflicts between fellow Arab states, the League placed security above all other priorities from the start (Ibrahim, 2016: 18). Thus, its main objective is not governance transfer but rather to ensure a certain degree of coordination between member states in areas of common interests provided that such coordination does not undermine three key principles: independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (Mohamedou, 2016: 1221). As a matter of fact, at least 12 key provisions were included into the Charter to “sanctify the sovereignty of the member states” and thus avoid any interference between fellow Arab states (Worrall, 2017: 45).

Considering the paramount importance it places on the sovereignty of its member states, does the Arab League play any role in supporting either democracy or autocracy? This case study will focus on the Arab League’s role in the EU Southern Neighbourhood. It will begin by examining how the regional organisation gradually adopted pro-democracy discourses. It will then explore the critical juncture created by the 2011 Arab uprisings, analysing how the League’s responses in affected countries and the justifications behind these actions. Finally, this study will assess the League’s role in the realms of democracy support and autocracy support in light of EU efforts in the region.

¹ Note: The content of this article was last updated on 1 September 2024.

1 The League: an organisation committed to democracy?

According to Youssef (2017), there are at least three obstacles to democracy support (DS) and democracy promotion (DP) within the Arab League. Firstly, the predominance of authoritarianism across the MENA region. Secondly, the emphasis on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference within the League can render any attempt to support democracy a form of interference in internal affairs. The LAS considers that the system of government in each member state is a domestic matter and, as stated in Article VIII, condemns any attempt at regime change. Finally, most League members claim to have a democratic regime, which makes democracy support appear unnecessary and irrelevant. Despite these claims, it is worth mentioning that there is not a single reference to democracy in the League's main treaties.

Even with these constraints, and notwithstanding the LAS being characterised as a “latecomer” in establishing governance standards in its member states (Hüllen, 2015: 135), it has developed a series of instruments related to democracy and its pillars. These instruments can be categorised into three groups: (1) democracy-building instruments; (2) democracy-relevant instruments; and (3) governance instruments.

1.1 The LAS' Democracy-Building Instruments

The League has provided support to different member states on issues of relevance to democracy building. For instance, it assisted countries such as Palestine (1999) and Iraq (2005) in drafting constitutions which included references to democratic principles (e.g., regular elections, representativeness, right to engage in political activity). Likewise, the pan-Arab organisation has contributed to the development of the judiciary system in a few Arab countries like Sudan (2008) through the promotion of a better governance, decentralisation and the use of modern technology (Youssef, 2017: 236).

The LAS has also been involved into reconciliation processes which, in these cases, were considered as prerequisite to achieving democracy. Two years after the US invasion of Iraq (2003), it actively participated in the Iraqi Reconciliation conference (November 2005) to prevent sectarianism from undermining the democratisation process (Moran, 2005). Likewise, the League facilitated the negotiations during the 2005 Lebanon crisis. The main outcome of these negotiations was the Doha Agreement (21 May 2008), which contributed to the formation of a government and parliamentary elections in Lebanon (Youssef, 2017).

Another key instrument used by the LAS in this field is independent election observation. Since its first election monitoring mission in Somalia (1992), the League carried out around 60 election-observation in Arab and non-Arab countries (Arab League 2015a, 2015b). Interestingly, the League's election monitoring activities in non-Arab countries include countries from the Eastern Neighbourhood such as Belarus (2006) and Georgia (2013). In a region where most countries do not hold free and fair elections, support to free and fair elections is key to any transition towards a more democratic system.

While the League has monitored a few free and fair elections in the post-2011 uprising era (e.g., Egypt and Libya in 2012, Tunisia in 2014), it also participated in unfair elections such as the 2014 Egypt's presidential election, almost a year after the 2013 military-led coup, won by former military chief Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi with an official score of 96.91%. Therefore, while independent election observation can theoretically be considered as a tool for DS, LAS missions in

authoritarian regimes can be used by autocrats to legitimise rigged elections and present them as fair.

1.2 The League's Democracy-relevant Instruments

Without directly calling for democratic transition, the Arab League has gradually taken some steps in the field of human rights and good governance. This move became clear at the occasion of the May 2004 Arab League Summit in Tunisia, when the LAS launched a call for reform, progress and modernisation, which included unusual references to democratic rule, the rule of law, human rights, political participation and freedom of expression (Youssef, 2017).

At least two reasons account for this sudden interest in human rights, democracy and good governance. Firstly, the Global War on Terror (GWT) launched by the George W. Bush administration in 2001, along with the US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq made Arab leaders aware of their vulnerability to regime change. Secondly, within the context of the GWT, policy and scholarly discussions on the so-called "root causes" of terrorism have put the spotlight on MENA countries, emphasising the need to fight against poverty, corruption, human rights violation and bad governance to counter violent extremism (Bourekba, 2020). Against this backdrop, the LAS and its member states increasingly displayed their commitment to good governance, democracy and human rights to fulfil three objectives: (1) signalling their willingness to engage in reforms; (2) consolidating their authoritarian rule in the guise of countering terrorism; and (3) dealing with Western powers without facing criticism (Hüllen, 2015).

As articulated in the "Declaration on Modernisation and Reform in the Arab World", adopted by the member states following the 2004 Tunisia Summit, the League expressed its willingness to work in two key directions. On one hand, there was a determination to reform the organisation to make it more representative. This encompassed the proposals such as establishing an Arab Parliament, incorporating Arab civil society organisations, and reviewing the League's voting process. On the other hand, the League was eager to contribute actively to the "modernisation" of Arab countries. The declaration highlighted the intention of the League to "continue the process of modernisation 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 (...)." (Abou Taleb, 2005).

The League also adopted a Charter on Human Rights on the same occasion. This Charter recognises the peoples' "right [of Arab people] to freely choose their political system" (article 2) and refers to a series of political and civil rights and fundamental liberties including: free and fair elections, freedom of association and freedom of assembly (UN. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and League of Arab States, 2004: 2). However, the list of human rights contained in the Charter falls short of international standards in certain fields, such as gender equality or death penalty. This shortfall is primarily attributed to the League's lack of experience in the realms of democracy and human rights (Hüllen, 2015, Rishmawi, 2005). Although the Charter came into force in 2008 and has been accepted by 16 member states, it is worth noting that this text is not binding for the member states that did not vote in favour of it. As a case point, Tunisia did not accept it since it raised concerns on whether it provided less

protection for rights than their domestic laws (Rishmawi). Finally, there are no efficient measures or mechanisms to ensure the Charter is respected.²

Bearing in mind the international context that led the LAS to adopt the Charter on Human rights and considering the lack of mechanisms to ensure its compliance, we can question the reality of the League's commitment to human rights. Indeed, it appears that the Charter is adapted to conform with the principle of sovereignty and "intended to accommodate positions of some Arab states" (Rishmawi, 2005) while "preserv[ing] their respective regimes and privileges" (Kröning, 2013: 27). In the words of Hüllen (2015: 136), the aim of the League was "to deflect external pressure instead of effectively promoting and protecting governance standards" in the Arab world.

Thus, the Charter appears to be a symbolic document with no practical impact on the internal affairs of member states (Ibrahim, 19). The League's shift towards democracy, human rights and modernisation appears to constitute a discursive strategy rather than a substantive response to domestic calls for reform. As will be demonstrated, the League's response to the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) tends to support this interpretation (see section II).

1.3 The LAS Governance Instruments

Since the Tunisia Summit, the LAS has attempted to launch several initiatives with the aim of making this regional organisation more representative vis-à-vis Arab citizens. In March 2005, it proposed the creation of a Transitional Arab Parliament which was expected to prepare the ground for a Permanent Arab Parliament. Established in Cairo in 2012, the permanent Arab Parliament consists of 88 members, with four members selected from each Arab country. The members are not directly elected by Arab citizens while the method of selection varies from country to country. So far, the Arab Parliament has had mixed results: although it helped to structure interaction between different political forces in the Arab countries and to create new alignments, it cannot be representative given the predominance of authoritarian regimes in the region (Youssef, 2017: 238).

In 2005, the LAS also granted an observer status for Arab NGOs working in the fields of human rights and economic and social issues, which allows them to take part in joint activities and projects within the League. Despite of some progress, the requirements to become an observer are still very demanding (FIDH, 28).³ Finally, in the context of the 2011 Arab uprisings, an Independent Committee was created in 2011 to outline the main axes of a reform of the LAS. The reform was presented in 2013 and included several proposals in the realms of democracy and human rights such as reinforcing the system to supervise elections; paving the way for NGOs to acquiring a consultative status; and creating a Human Rights Court (Youssef, 2017: 242). In a similar way as the 2004 Tunis call for reform and modernisation, the main aim was to facilitate the much needed political, economic, social and educational reforms to respond. However, this call for reform has not been followed up.

² An internal committee, the "Arab Human Rights Committee" was created in 2008 to supervise the implementation of the Charter. However, it proved to be a weak mechanism.

³ Some of these conditions include having an Arab nationality, being non-profit and related to the HR Committee, with a mandate in compliance with the Arab Charter and a Pan-Arab identity, and the NGO's funding should originate from Arab organizations and institutions. Source: The Arab League and Human Rights Challenges Ahead. Regional Seminar held in Cairo on 16-17 February 2013. Available at : https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_lea_uk-lddouble.pdf

To conclude this section, the LAS has deployed a wide range of instruments and missions which are relevant to democracy support. However, the context within which these initiatives took place account for the limited scope and effectiveness of the suggested reforms. As we have seen, domestic and international pressures account for the League's discursive shift and calls for reform in the fields of democracy, human rights, governance, and the rule of law. More importantly, the lack of monitoring mechanism in these fields and the non-binding character of the decisions taken by the LAS precludes the possibility of effective democracy support in Arab majority countries (Mohamedou, 2016). In this context, the League's efforts in the domains of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and governance can be seen "through the conceptual lens of 'symbolic placation'" (Kröning, 2013: 28), that is to say as a strategy through which the League and its member states can present themselves as a modern regional organisation while reinvigorating their legitimacy and consolidating authoritarianism.

2 Oscillating between pro-revolutionary and counterrevolutionary stances: the Arab League during the 2011 uprisings

To understand the LAS attitude toward democracy support (DS) and autocracy support (AS), it is crucial to analyse its reactions and positions during the 2011 uprisings and the following years. The League's first official reaction was made during the Second Arab Economic, Social and Development Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh (January 2011), a few weeks after the widespread protests raged in Tunisia. On this occasion, the then Secretary-General of the League Amr Moussa warned that what seemed to be a "Tunisian revolution" could easily spread to other countries (Al Jazeera, 2011). He portrayed the Tunisian revolution as the outcome of a hard economic context, pointing out the alarming levels of anger and frustration in the Arab World.

Once the popular movements swamped to other Arab countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria, the League offered US\$2 billion to boost the economies of the affected countries and deployed the narrative that these unprecedented protests were primarily driven by economic deprivation. While such a discourse helped the LAS to sidestep the political dimension of the protests, the expansion and intensification of mass protests across the MENA region created a sense of fear and paralysis among Arab countries, which appeared ill-equipped to contain this wave of discontent (Worrall, 2017: 160).

As the process of democratic transition started to unfold in Egypt and Tunisia (2011-2013), the League did not play an active role in supporting these processes. Neither did it not "engage in the debate about political liberalisation and democratisation that raged on in the Arab world from 2011 to 2013", including questions related to human rights (Mohamedou, 2016: 1227). In the case of Egypt, the League even supported the military coup carried out in 2013 against democratically elected president Mohammed Morsi, arguing that it was a symbol of democracy and a popular revolution (Ibrahim, 2016)⁴. The new regime led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was supported and the League held a summit in Sharm el-Sheikh in 2015. While the lack of action in this case has been explained by the "lack of institutional, normative, and know-how power" in

⁴ The Secretary General of the Arab League, Nabil el-Arabi, declared about the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt: "I will not call it a military coup (...) What happened was intervention by the military to respond to the massive demonstration reflecting the desire and determination of the Egyptian people to return to real democracy." Source: Gavlak, Dale. 'Revolution or coup? Whatever it is, Egypt's crisis is deepening'. MintPress News, 8 Jul. 2013. <https://www.mintpressnews.com/revolution-or-coup-egypts-crisis-is-deepening/164956/>

the field of democracy support and transition justice (Ibrahim, 2016: 7), it also supports Pevehous' thesis (2005) according to which democracy support can only be provided by democratic regional organisations.

As we will observe in the next subsection, there is a notable contrast between the League's lack of action following the 2011 protests in Tunisia and Egypt, and its proactive and vigorous involvement in the Libyan and Syrian situations.

2.1 The “Activist Moment” of the Arab League

With the soaring expectations for democratisation across the MENA region, the 2011 uprisings presented a golden opportunity for the Arab League to not only restore its reputation among Arab nations but also (re)gain credibility in the eyes of the international community. In this regard, the League demonstrated remarkable engagement on significant fronts: Libya and Syria.

2.1.1 Libya

In Libya, the LAS decided to act when the rebels were about to lose the fight against Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. The League's Secretary-General condemned Gaddafi on the 22nd of February 2011, and suspended Libya's membership to the LAS because of the fears of civil war. Along with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the League also demanded the United Nations to impose a no-fly zone over Libya and to carry out airstrikes on the Libyan forces. While there was a consensus amongst Arab states on the no-fly zone, several members of the League opposed the airstrikes. These sanctions were framed as a humanitarian endeavour to protect Libyan civilians. In late August of the same year, six months after the country's suspension from the League, the pan-Arab organisation recognised the rebel body – the National Transitional Council – as the legitimate authority in the country by readmitting Libya in the organisation under its mandate (Al Jazeera, 2011).

The assassination of Muammar Gaddafi (20 October 2011), leading to the downfall of the Gaddafi regime, propelled the Arab League into a position of “global political relevance”. This regional organisation, alongside the GCC, truly became a “gatekeeper for external interventions” in the MENA region (Worrall, 165). The Libyan case presented an opportunity for the League to play a significant role that aligned with its own interests in terms of Arab public opinion and the international community. It also provided a change to rejuvenate its image as an organisation dedicated to the well-being of Arab citizens and to partner with Western countries on what appeared to be a shared objective (regime change in Libya). It therefore served to fill a legitimacy void (Alaaldin, 2016: 9-10).

The League's stance on Libya is also due to the influence of certain countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, who played a major role in this case to serve their own interests. For instance, Qatar presented the no-fly zone decision as a commonly agreed decision within the League even though the vote was contested by almost half of the members. In a broader context where Al Jazeera played a significant role in amplifying the voices of the protesters across the region from Morocco to Bahrain, the Qatari strategy proved instrumental in portraying the Libyan intervention as a concerted Qatari endeavour aimed at supporting democratisation in the MENA region (Debre, 2021).

Put simply, the Libyan case helped to portray the League as an organisation dedicated to the ideals of democracy. It also contributed to downplay the GCC countries as allies to the protesters, except in their own countries as the case of Bahrain shows (see next subsection). At the same

time, it is worth underlining that the League's role in legitimising foreign interventions in the region also made this organisation appear as a threat to the regime of its member states (Kröning, 2013: 48).

2.1.2 Syria

As the uprisings erupted in Syria in March 2011, the League found itself compelled to respond due to the mounting pressure arising from the wide support shown by Arab citizens towards the Syrian protesters. Moreover, engaging in conflict resolution in Syria presented an opportunity to address the criticism it had received for its position regarding the protests in Bahrain (see the following subsection).

The League made several attempts to resolve the Syrian crisis. In September 2011, it called for multi-candidate presidential elections after the end of Bashar Al Assad's term, the end of acts of violence against civilians, and a political dialogue between the president and Syrian opposition forces. On 2 November 2011, the Syrian government agreed to the proposed peace plan. Yet, as the killings of civilians were reported, the League decided to suspend Syria's membership and took economic sanctions such as freezing assets and travel restrictions. A final attempt was carried out in December 2011, when Syria signed with the Arab League a plan calling for withdrawal of the Syrian army and the rebel forces from the streets, the release of political prisoners and the admittance of its monitors to Syria to allow for a political dialogue. As the Syrian regime kept repressing protesters, the LAS finally suspended its monitoring mission by the end of January 2012. This lack of cooperation led to political isolation of the Syrian regime from a majority of LAS member states (Debre, 2021: 525). A year later, the LAS decided to support the opposition. It recognised the opposition as the legitimate representative of Syrian people on 12 November 2012 and offered them a seat at the League four months later during the Arab Summit in Doha (26 March 2013). To justify the sanctions and recognition of the opposition, the League employed a similar narrative of humanitarian intervention and the right to self-determination as it has done in the case of Libya. From this point of view, the League's decision to suspend Syria was intended to reflect its willingness to "protect Arab identity and with it the well-being of the Arab population" (Debre, 2021: 525).

We cannot fully understand the decisions taken by the League without considering the influence exerted by certain Arab States seeking to advance their own interests. As in Libya, Saudi Arabia and Qatar played a significant role in the case of Syria. There are at least three reasons that led Gulf states to side with Syrian protesters. Firstly, the need to re-legitimise their action after the inconsistencies observed in the way they handled the Libyan and Bahraini cases. Secondly, although they were much less affected by the uprisings than other Arab countries, GCC countries needed to line up with their public opinions, which were in favour of the protesters, to strengthen their own legitimacy domestically. Finally, the future of Syria has stronger and more direct implications for them than Libya. GCC countries wanted to contain the Iranian expansion by provoking regime change that would lead to the formation of an allied government in Syria. In this context, Qatar wanted to become "the Arab face of the Syria dossier" (Kröning, 2013: 67) and used the conflict as a way of "global branding strategy", while preserving and increasing the "credibility of the League" (Kröning, 2013: 61). On the other hand, Saudi's engagement within the League was mostly guided by self-interests. The kingdom pursued two priorities: (1) to preserve Arab monarchies from the wave of protests and conflicts, and (2) to keep external influences – especially Iran's – out of its fellow Arab counterparts.

Thus, the question of legitimacy is key: pushing the LAS to adopt sanctions against Syria was a way to respond both to domestic and international demands for change in Syria. This way, "regimes hoped to present themselves as engaged and responsive rulers to their publics by selectively aligning themselves with the demands of the Arab (Sunni) public when it seemed relatively costless (at least in the short-term calculus) and issuing sanctions against two highly unpopular leaders, Gaddafi in Libya and Assad in Syria, in the name of protecting democracy, human rights, and Arab identity" (Debre, 2021: 526).

Despite of these decisions, the LAS has failed to provoke regime change in Syria. This failure can be attributed to two elements. On the one hand, although the League managed to impose economic and political sanctions, and recommended its member States to withdraw their ambassadors, the non-binding character of its decisions explains why some Arab states continued to have diplomatic relations with Syria. However, this limitation is also a positive aspect to the extent that the non-binding character of LAS' resolutions made its member States accept the new role of the regional organisation in addressing issues related to human rights violations (Kröning, 2013). On the other hand, the failure to solve the Syrian conflict was attributed to the fact that the League had "no control on many of the local, regional, and international actors involved in the Syrian conflict" (Ibrahim, 2016: 27). Finally, the readmission of Syria within the Arab League in March 2023 is a blatant proof that it has renounced to its initial support to regime change in favour of normalisation with the Syrian authoritarian regime.

To summarise, the involvement of the League in Libya and Syria showed the organisation's inclination to align with Arab protesters and present itself as a supporter of democracy. In both instances, the LAS implemented economic and political sanctions and even endorsed military intervention in the case of Libya under to guise of a humanitarian and pro-democracy narrative. This narrative intertwined the responsibility to protect civilians from potential civil war and human rights violations with the imperative to uphold the right to self-determination. (Ibrahim, 7). Nevertheless, there were other motivations. As Maria Josepha Debre states, "authoritarian survival politics and the involved legitimacy crisis" account for the sanctioning decisions adopted by the Debre (2021: 518). In other words, the League needed to re-legitimise itself and overcome the perception of collective Arab inaction to solve its own problems (Alaaldin, 2016: 12). Besides that, as we have seen earlier the decisions taken by the League were considerably influenced by GCC countries, driven by their own interests, which encompassed the survival of their regimes, enhancing domestic legitimacy, and containing Iran's regional influence. In this context, the League's relative inactivity in other conflicts that emerged in 2011 tends to support this perspective.

2.2 Inaction as a form of autocracy support: the League's involvement in Bahrain and Yemen

The protests that erupted in Tunisia and Egypt in December 2010 and January 2011 quickly extended to two geographically distant countries from the EU Southern Neighbourhood: Bahrain and Yemen. In Yemen, after Tunisian citizens ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali from power, pro-democracy activists and members of the opposition staged protests called on President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down as president (he agreed to in February 2012). In Bahrain, the protests began on 14 February 2011, three days after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. The protesters, initially organised by Shia communities, called for greater political freedom, respect for human rights and constitutional reform. In both cases, the League's involvement was significantly different from its approach in Libya and Syria.

2.2.1 Bahrain

In Bahrain, a Shia-majority country ruled by a Sunni family and a key Western ally home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, the protests were primarily seen by neighbouring Gulf countries as a threat to regional stability for three main reasons. Firstly, once the initial calls for constitutional reform turned into calls to overthrow the monarchy, these protests could de-legitimise fellow monarchical regimes in the region (i.e., absolute monarchies). Secondly, the fact that these protests were launched by members of the Shia majority could encourage other Shia populations in GCC countries (around 30% of the Kuwaiti population, 10% to 15% of the Saudi, Emirati and Qatari populations) to go by the same path. Finally, in a context marked by increasing geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, GCC countries immediately accused Teheran of fomenting unrest in Gulf countries to expand its influence. For all these reasons, GCC countries took a highly defensive role that starkly contrasted with their seemingly supportive stance towards the popular protests in Libya and Syria (Hassan, 2015).

After weeks of protests, and in response to the demand made by Bahrain's ruling family, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sent troops and police forces to repress the protesters. This operation, called the Peninsular Shield Force, was decided by the GCC on 14 March 2011. In this case, the League's limited role can be attributed to two factors. On the one hand, the clear positioning of GCC countries who opted for countering the revolutionary movement in Bahrain using coercive means (*democracy resistance*). On the other hand, the *authoritarian collaboration* between GCC monarchies and Bahrain, with the former "only extend[ing] solidarity to fellow monarchical regimes in the region" (Debre, 2021: 517). This collaboration aimed to maintain regime stability and discourage any attempt at democratic reforms.

However, this limited role does not imply the complete absence of the League from this conflict. Shortly after the GCC's decision to intervene militarily in Bahrain, the League issued a statement affirming the legitimacy of such intervention. Thus, the regional organisation supported the GCC-sponsored intervention in Bahrain and adopted the narrative used by the instigators of this intervention⁵. As Debre (2021: 524) points out, "Bahraini demonstrators were increasingly painted as inspired by external forces that would bring about a violent Iranian-led Shia revolution endangering the whole Gulf community, not as legitimate movements for political participation". In this context, the pressure exerted by Saudi Arabia and Qatar on this issue also "served effectively to repulse any efforts by League to condemn the Bahraini regime's repression of peaceful protests or Saudi Arabia's assistance" (Kröning, 2013: 55).

Therefore, unlike its role in Libya and Syria, the League seems to have joined GCC countries in countering the pro-democracy protests in Bahrain due to the *fear of contagion* of many of its members.

2.2.2 Yemen

In Yemen, the League also assumed a secondary role, deferring the spotlight to the Gulf Cooperation Council. Initially, it supported the GCC initiative to solve the crisis, which called for the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the transfer of power of his vice president. This proposal by GCC countries was aimed at avoiding "democratic contagion" and a civil war

⁵ According to Kröning (2013), Iraq was the only country to openly oppose the GCC-led intervention in Bahrain as it feared that it could lead to a sectarian war in the country and elsewhere in the region. As a matter of fact, GCC countries put efforts to silence the Iraqi's opposition to the intervention by forcing the postponement of Baghdad's summit on several occasions.

in their backyard (Worrall, 2017: 168). This changed in March 2015 when Riyadh formed a coalition of nine countries to intervene militarily in this country, which included GCC countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, KSA, Kuwait, UAE) and a few other members of the Arab League (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan).

The League aligned with Saudi-led policies in the Gulf region as it supported the Saudi-led military intervention to assist the government against the Houthi rebels, allegedly backed by Iran (Ibrahim, 2016). The *fear of contagion* was very palpable amongst Arab states as they decided, in the context of the Saudi-led war on Yemen, to create a joint Arab military force to preserve stability and contain the influence of Iran in the region (BBC News, 2015). This force was expected to comprise 40,000 elite troops and to have its headquarters in Cairo or Riyadh. The fact that this initiative was announced by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi, an autocrat who came to power after staging a coup d'état against democratically elected President Mohammed Morsi, is not a mere coincidence (Boyle and Al-Alyaa, 2015). Finally, it is worth underlining the LAS has not raised any criticism regarding the human rights violations resulting from the military intervention in Yemen.

Therefore, the League's reaction to the conflict in Yemen mirrors the one it had in Bahrain, as it sided with the key countries that chose to intervene militarily to prevent "democratic contagion" in their own countries. In other words, the League's stance on the Yemeni situation favoured status quo (i.e., countering the potentially democratic turn of the events) rather than change in this country.

All in all, the League has taken a very different approach to the protests in Bahrain and Yemen than it did in the cases of Libya and Syria. It aligned with GCC countries and approved the different initiatives led by the regional organisation aimed at containing a "democratic contagion" in the region. Given the potential impact of the Bahraini and Yemeni protests on the Gulf region, the League adopted the same reading of the conflict as most Gulf countries; a reading which considered political developments in Bahrain and Yemen as the manifestation of Iran's growing influence in the region.

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, the response of the Arab League to the 2011 uprisings varied depending on the countries involved. In the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, the pan-Arab organisation remained relatively passive in a context marked by emerging political transitions and did not propose any initiatives to advance towards democracy in these two countries. It even accepted the coup d'état orchestrated by the current Egyptian president al Sisi. However, in the four cases analysed – Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen – the League has been much more active.

The League's "activism" in Libya and Syria showcased its symbolic power and demonstrated that its decisions can have tangible consequences on the ground. Both countries faced sanctions and isolation from most Arab partners as a result of the League's actions. The LAS' advocated for a no-fly zone, military intervention, sanctions and regime in the name of humanitarian protection and support for democracy. These arguments allowed the League to deviate from its fundamental principles of sovereignty and non-interference while seemingly endorsing the aspirations of Arab citizens. Even though the LAS does not have any democracy clause allowing for the suspension of member states to preserve democracy, its action in Libya and Syria suggested that it could "finally embrace norms of democracy and human rights protection"

(Debre, 2021: 517). Bearing in mind that most member states are autocracies, the League's calls for democratic transition in Libya and Syria can hardly be labelled as genuine pro-democracy support. As a matter of fact, the LAS member states (e.g., Qatar, KSA) that used the pro-democracy support rhetoric to justify the League's stance on Libya and Syria did not commit any domestic reform.

In this respect, the gap between the principles and ideals mobilised by the League and the lack of domestic reform of most LAS member states informs about the *motivations* of the regional organisation. At first glance, the pro-democracy attitude of the League is completely contradictory with its principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. Two set of explanations may help to understand such a contradiction. Firstly, we have seen that certain member states – especially GCC countries – have played a prominent role in pushing the League to adopt an “activist stance” against these two regimes. Driven by the *fear of contagion*, these countries used the League to display their commitment to democracy and human rights with two aims: (1) (re-)legitimising their own regimes by siding with the protesters and with their own public opinion and (2) enhancing the image of the League. Under this perspective, sanctions against the Libyan and Syrian regimes should be seen as “a means of authoritarian rulers to try and re-legitimise themselves by strengthening the domestic narrative of being democratically legitimate regimes that protect human rights” (Debre, 2021: 520). As Kröning (2013: 29) puts it, this apparently pro-democracy attitude - along with the LAS reforms in the field of governance, democracy and human rights - was “intended to change the League's image but not its central function as a forum for collective legitimation for the regimes in place”.

Our analysis of the League's response to the protests in Bahrain and Yemen further supports this view. The League framed the protests in Bahrain and Yemen in the same terms as GCC countries, which underscores the central role played by Gulf States in the organisation's decisions. The geographic location of Bahrain and Yemen, the triggers for the protests (e.g., call for constitutional reform and Sunni/Shia question) and the perceived Iranian involvement in strengthened the authoritarian collaboration between GCC countries to prevent any ‘democratic contagion’. In this context, the League has been instrumental in legitimising the GCC intervention in Bahrain and the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, without raising any concern for democracy and human rights violations in these countries.

Overall, the 2011 uprisings opened a window of opportunity for the League and its member states to deploy a legitimation strategy during a time of acute legitimacy crisis for authoritarianism across the MENA region. The apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in the League's responses to the Libyan and Syrian crises (pro-democracy and humanitarian discourse) compared to its stance on the protests in Bahrain and Yemen (authoritarian collaboration) highlights the existence of a legitimation strategy. This strategy, which can be defined as “a strategic rhetorical process whereby the popular image of the regime is raised through reference to the beneficial effects of regional cooperation, to regional foreign policy accomplishments, or to regional identity discourses” (Debre, 2021: 520), has been supported by several member states in times of crisis to reinvigorate to rebrand their image towards their citizens and the international community.

Therefore, this case study shows that a regional organisation such as the League can espouse a pro-democracy discourse while simultaneously engaging in authoritarian collaboration to maintain regional stability. Consequently, the positions and actions of the League cannot be dissociated from the interests of certain of its member states, primarily GCC countries. As

Mohamedou (2016: 1229) aptly points out, the recent adoption of universal values by the League is misleading to the extent that it is “marred by double-standards and inconsistencies and, paradoxically, driven by an attempt to line up with external policy agendas”.

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