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Andrea Cofelice

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The **Policy Paper** series of the Centre for Studies on Federalism includes analyses and policy-oriented research in the field of national and supranational federalism. The papers aim to stimulate scholarly and political debate on topical issues by presenting original data, ideas and proposals.

The “Joint Arab Force”: a stillborn project?

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There is a general and growing tendency among regional organisations to create their own standing rapid reaction forces to respond to internal and external threats, also as a consequence of the freezing of the reform process of the United Nations Security Council, which is no longer perceived as the main “provider” of international security¹. The latest example comes from the African Union, which is on its way to completing the creation of an African Standby Force².

Also the Arab region has been not excluded from this trend: in the first half of 2015, indeed, the League of Arab States seemed to be keen on establishing a permanent joint Arab military force. In early February 2015, this idea was launched by the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and soon backed by Saudi Arabia and the Arab League Secretary General El-Araby³.

In principle, the proposal could be considered as a positive move with a view to endow the Arab League with an autonomous tool to tackle multiple security threats across the region. In practice, however, the project is first and foremost the result of the contingent convergence of interests between the two leading Arab states, and should not be interpreted as a step in a broader and planned strategy aiming at increasing the level of political integration in the Arab League.

President al-Sisi, indeed, called for such a force primarily to fight the terrorist threat in countries such as Libya, Syria and Iraq, which is perceived as “an unprecedented threat to the member nations existence and identities”⁴. This perception can be understood if it is considered that Egypt is at the forefront in facing the threat of Islamist militants both in its western neighbour (Libya) and in its eastern Sinai Peninsula.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies considered the joint force as a useful instrument to counter the expanding Iranian (and Shiite) influence in the region. After all, the idea of an Arab force was already being tested in Yemen, where in March 2015 a Saudi-led Arab coalition began a campaign of airstrikes against the Houthi rebels and their allies: in Riyadh's view, the joint force would give a permanent character to this coalition⁵.

The official launch of the project occurred at the 26th Summit of the Arab League held in Sharm el-Sheikh in March 2015, when member states agreed to form a Joint Arab Force in order to confront growing regional security threats under the 1950 Arab Defence Treaty (Resolution n. 628), setting an extremely ambitious four-month timeframe to decide on its composition and rules of engagement. A draft protocol was thus elaborated in the following two months, during a series of high-level meetings in Egypt and Saudi Arabia among the Chiefs of Staff of all Arab countries, with the only exclusion of Syria⁶. The draft was then submitted to the Arab League Troika (at the time Egypt, Kuwait and Morocco) and to all Arab states for consultation.

Even though the draft protocol has never been made public, informed reports by the Arab and international press have revealed many of its details. According to the protocol, the Joint Arab Force would have the mandate to intervene against threats to the peace and security to any member state, by deploying, inter alia, peace keeping, humanitarian assistance, and search-and-rescue operations. In the full respect of the principle of national sovereignty, the joint force would only intervene upon request of assistance from the state party under threat.

As to its size and military capability, the Arab Force would consist of around 40,000 troops (then larger than the NATO Response Force) and should be based in Egypt, at the headquarters of the Arab League. The bulk of the troops should come from Egypt, Morocco and Jordan, while the oil-rich Gulf states are expected to provide the necessary funding for the force's long-term maintenance. The force is also set to have its command structure, made up of an air, a naval and a land operations command, with at the top a commander general to be appointed for a renewable two-year term.

When aspiration meets reality: the "indefinite postponement" of the Joint Arab Force

At the end of the four-month timeframe, Foreign and Defence Ministers of the Arab League members were expected to meet in Cairo in order to adopt the protocol on the Joint Arab Force and open the ratification process. However, a first meeting scheduled for 29 July was postponed by a month for further consultation; a new meeting scheduled for 27 August was again postponed, but this time "indefinitely", following a request from Saudi Arabia, backed by Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Iraq.

How to explain such an unforeseen outcome, when for months the Arab League had stressed the pressing need for a joint military force? The truth is that Arab countries agreed upon the creation of such a force *only in principle*, since it was perceived as a useful tool to protect, whenever necessary, ruling regimes from new and old security threats, as well as to prevent possible interferences from external powers, with particular reference to Iran and NATO, whose intervention in Libya in 2012 left the country in chaos. However, despite any statement of unity, when practical issues concerning the future force came at stake (including its objectives and operative mechanisms, as well as organisational and legal aspects), regional rivalries, political distrust, and the divergent interests and priorities among Arab states (all factors that have traditionally hampered the work of the League) soon re-emerged and led to the failure of the initiative.

In particular, Arab League members failed to find an agreement on several vital questions, that remained unanswered. First of all, according to media reports, one of the most harshly debated issues was where to deploy the Arab Force, if at all. With more than one crisis area in the region, which country should the joint force give priority to: Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq? For Egypt and Tunisia, the direct threat comes from Libya, whereas for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries the main challenge comes from a destabilised (and Iran-infiltrated) Yemen. On the other hand, for Jordan and Lebanon (but also Kuwait), the main threat comes from Syria and Iraq.

Secondly, during negotiations it soon became clear that the new force would have difficulty reaching consensus on military intervention in cases like Syria and Libya, where different Arab countries support rival parties and the Arab League is deeply divided over the desired outcome of the respective civil wars. Given this context, who will decide on any action to be taken with respect to these countries? Under the draft protocol of the Joint Force, the Arab League Secretary General would be entitled to act, but who actually issues a resolution calling for action would remain a particularly thorny political question.

Thirdly, in an Arab League where the principle of national sovereignty represents the most formidable taboo, preventing any supranational development, the simple proposal of the Joint Arab Force was perceived by some countries as an unacceptable interference in their domestic affairs. Algeria, for instance, expressed serious concerns in this sense, claiming that a joint force would impose significant restrictions on its sovereignty, thus violating the Arab Defence Treaty, and that in general it preferred to keep its military resources at home to fight local security crises.

Moreover, due to the overwhelming participation of Sunni-led countries, such a force would risk to appear too close to a sectarian Sunni (rather than a truly Arab) joint force. It is not by chance, indeed, that the Shiite-led Iraqi government was the only one to officially express reservations about the Joint Force at the Sharm el-Sheikh summit, when Baghdad's Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari declared that "we will never allow the intervention of non-Iraqi forces on Iraqi soil"⁷.

Arab states also reportedly disagreed as to whether the future force should be headquartered in Cairo. President al-Sisi, who leads the Arab world's largest standing army, obviously pressed for this solution, so as to present it nationally as a success achieved by his still precarious regime. But Algeria and Qatar, this latter at odds with Egypt since the overthrow of the former president Muhammad Mursi, firmly objected to this location, in order to prevent Egypt from exerting too much influence on the Joint Force.

A final key challenge is represented by the lack of common and standardised equipment, weaponry, training, operation doctrines, communications, logistics and procedures among the currently

existing Arab armies. Such a huge diversity creates serious difficulties in mobilizing and sustaining a single Arab force in joint operations and, in any case, it makes appear as totally unrealistic the proposed four-month timeframe for the Joint Force creation.

In sum, the project of a Joint Arab Force has been victim of the Arab League's long-lasting problems and conflicts, and even if the Joint Force had been effectively created, it would have hardly contributed to solve them. Thus, for the time being, the project has been put aside.

Notes

- ¹ See, in particular, Abass, A. (2004), *Regional Organizations and the Development of Collective Security. Beyond Chapter VIII of the UN Charter*, Portland (OR), Hart Publishing.
- ² BBC News, *African Standby Force starts first military exercises*, 19 October 2015 (www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34570755. Latest access: December 2015). On the African regional security architecture, see also Van Nieuwkerk A. (2011), *The regional roots of the African peace and security architecture: exploring centre–periphery relations*, in "South African Journal of International Affairs", 18 (2), p. 169-189.
- ³ El-Araby, in particular, voiced the urgent need for establishing a joint Arab military force in order to "fight terrorism" and "help in peace missions and civilian protection". Quoted by Russia Today, *Will a Pan-Arab 'NATO-style force' secure the Arab region?*, 3 June 2015 (www.rt.com/op-edge/264669-arab-nato-security-isis-force/. Latest access: December 2015).
- ⁴ Wall Street Journal, *Arab League Agrees to Create Joint Military Force*, 29 March 2015 (www.wsj.com/articles/arab-league-agrees-to-create-joint-military-force-1427632123. Latest access: December 2015). It is not by chance, indeed, that the Egyptian president launched the idea soon after the beheading in Libya of 22 Egyptian migrant workers by a local affiliate of Daesh, which drew airstrikes by the Egyptian air force against militant sites in the Libyan city of Derna.
- ⁵ The coalition that gave birth to "Operation Decisive Storm" in Yemen is composed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Sudan.
- ⁶ In November 2011, Syria was suspended from the LAS: its seat is still vacant.
- ⁷ Middle East Eye, *Joint Arab force seen as 'aspiration rather than reality'*, 31 March 2015 (www.middleeasteye.net/news/joint-arab-force-seen-aspiration-rather-reality-921872157. Latest access: December 2015).

CENTRE FOR STUDIES ON FEDERALISM

The **Centre for Studies on Federalism (CSF)** was established in November 2000 under the auspices of the Compagnia di San Paolo and the Universities of Turin, Pavia and Milan. It is presently a foundation.

The activities of the CSF are focused on interdisciplinary research, documentation and information on internal and supranational federalism, the developments of regional and continental integration (notably, of the European Union), the issues related to the world order and the democratization process of the international system.

The CSF promotes an annual **Lecture**, named after Altiero Spinelli, on topical European issues. The CSF publishes **Research** and **Policy Paper**, as well as its own “**Federalism**”, **The Federalist Debate** (also online), the **Bibliographical Bulletin on Federalism**, the online-journal **Perspectives on Federalism**, the **International Democracy Watch**.

CENTRE FOR STUDIES ON FEDERALISM

Via Real Collegio, 30
10024 Moncalieri (Turin) - ITALY
Phone +39 011 670 5024
Fax +39 011 670 5081
info@csfederalismo.it
www.csfederalismo.it